screenwriting for Neurotics

A Beginner's Guide to Writing a Feature-Length Screenplay from Start to Finish

"What comes through is not just the author's deep understanding of screenwriting but also his deep love of classic cinema." — PETER BOGDANOVICH, director, *The Last Picture Show; What's Up, Doc?; Paper Moon; Mask*

Scott Winfield Sublett

SCREENWRITING *for Neurotics*

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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO WRITING A FEATURE-LENGTH SCREENPLAY FROM START TO FINISH

SCOTT WINFIELD SUBLETT

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Dedicated
to my loyal friend
CATHLEEN MILLER,
who proves that writers
can and do change the
world

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INTRODUCTION

MYTHS THAT MAKE YOU CRAZY

I'm jumpy. Born high-strung, reared in a house situated adjacent to a munitions testing facility, I developed the usual traits of the very, very nervous: spotty concentration, a tendency to be easily overwhelmed, and crushing self-doubt. Naturally, I wanted to be a writer.

After a few false starts, generally stalling out somewhere between pages 13 and 27, I took a class, which was pretty awful.

Eventually I moved to California and was accepted into the best screenwriting program in the country, at UCLA. My dedicated professors there taught me a lot. Slowly, agonizingly, I finished screenplays and improved as a writer. I was not yet really *good*, however, and—worse—writing was still torture. Even back in my twenties, when I was a newspaper film critic, a pal who was a Washington gossip columnist described me as "the type that opens a vein and dips the quill into it." I was perversely proud. Isn't suffering a badge of honor?

It was not until I started teaching and had to design a screenwriting class for absolute beginners that the dawning came. I realized that none of the books on the subject really broke down screenwriting in a way that made it, for me, easy, fun, and free of terror. So I'd have to create my own system and my own book that would completely demystify the process, reject phony formulas in favor of timeless principles, and, most important, hold the hands of beginners. Step by little step, it would tell them exactly *what* to do and *when* to do it—breaking a big, scary, overwhelming task into a sequence of manageable bites. My method does not do what so many do: throw a bunch of rules at you and leave you on your own as to how to get there. It assigns you a series of tasks into which the principles are embedded. You just . . . follow . . . the steps.

That means you have to trust me, which can be hard. Maybe

you've read other screenwriting books and asked yourself, "What the hell are they talking about?" You are not crazy.

If you've been in the world of art any length of time you know that it's full of charlatans who promise to help aspiring artists but are out to clip them. Sickening. Thank goodness I have a cushy tenured professorship and a flourishing creative life as an indie filmmaker and playwright and don't need to soil my soul cheating people. Artists deserve value for their money but get bilked by cynical sharks because they're generally idealistic, open, and trusting.

There's another kind of phony out there. Sometimes, like me, they're tenured. While many splendid writing teachers can be found at universities, others would love to help you but can only manage "table readings," lame exercises, and pints of ale after class, because boozing with students is "part of the job." The next morning, the worse for wear in the faculty lounge, they shrug and wearily confide that "writing can't be taught" but "at least we're providing a context for student work." If you've been through any creative writing graduate program you've seen those guys. I like them better than the out-and-out frauds because they mean well. As for me, I do not drink pints with the students. I drink gin at home with all the lights on and the TV up loud, as a neurotic writer should.

I have made a lot of mistakes over the years but don't regret them, because they made me the screenwriting teacher that I wish I'd had as an undergraduate and gave me the conscious grip on technique that renders me calm and confident. I want you to have that calmness and confidence too.

We're almost ready to learn screenwriting. We'll do it slowly and in little bites. Don't worry. I have taken pains to make the book an easy read. You won't waste time on a lot of exercises. You will make the series of decisions that you need to make in planning and executing a screenplay and will be presented with those decisions in the right order. Don't skip chapters, because that defeats the purpose. The key to teaching is delivering the right information in the right order (which, coincidentally, is also a key to storytelling).

As I break the process of screenwriting into a correctly ordered series of tasks I occasionally offer advice on how to keep craziness in check as you tackle this big, hard undertaking that's made up of a lot of small, not-so-hard choices. You will not be overwhelmed. Concentrate on the whirling thingamajig. You . . . will . . . not . . . be . . . overwhelmed.

Before we begin, however, I want to disabuse you of some assumptions that could hold you back: the Myths of Screenwriting. Life is so unfair; not only is it hard to get good instruction in screenwriting, but lots of what you've been told is wrong. Myths that you've absorbed over the years can stop you before you start. Let us expose and merrily smash them.

MYTH: Plot is *déclassé*.

You picked up the myth that plot is for proles in an English class where someone subliminally communicated to you that theme and a nicely turned sentence are what matter. This was handy for the instructor, who had no idea how to teach plotting. You can be sure that what matters most in dramatic writing is plot. Aristotle said so.

MYTH: The proper "shape" of a plot is an isosceles triangle sitting on its base with "rising action" on the left slope, "falling action" on the right, and "climax" on the middle point.

Yikes! More daftness promulgated by your junior high English teacher. Revisit that English teacher, ask what "falling action" actually is, and watch him squirm. No, don't, you're not a mean person.

MYTH: If you write "visually," you should be a screenwriter.

OK, I promise that this is the last time I'll knock the English Department, but that's what crafty English teachers say to students they want to get shed of. Trust me, they never say it to writers they want to keep. Actually, it's *novelists* who write visually: long, dreary descriptions of the Devonshire countryside and all that. Dramatists write *dramatically* in scenes of *conflict* (something you'll understand very well later in the book). They provide structure (which is to say plot), character, and dialogue. The ability to write scenes is what's needed. The "visuals" you leave to the director and cinematographer. They have cameras.

MYTH: "Show us, don't tell us" means that, in a screenplay, accomplishing a thing visually is superior to doing it with sound or dialogue.

"Show us don't tell us" is not about the opposition between visual and aural elements in filmmaking, both of which are entirely and equally valid and important. The saying refers to the difference between scene and summary. Summary is narration and is used in prose fiction. Its equivalent in screenwriting is voice-over narration, which is a cheap crutch except in the hands of Billy Wilder. When Vitaphone came along in 1927 a lot of smart people, Charlie Chaplin among them, said it was the end of film as Art. They were quite wrong. Film remained what it was: a series of scenes of conflict—but now with Groucho Marx saying funny things.

MYTH: I don't know enough about film history to be a good screenwriter.

You don't have to know a thing about film history, and this from someone who teaches university-level classes in it. Sometimes a knowledge of cinema classics helps, but at other times it tangles you up, tempting you to shoehorn moments from other films into your script when the best solution to your script's problems will probably grow organically out of the script itself. What's more, the past can intimidate. Don't be that beginner who says, "I'll never be as funny as Preston Sturges so why even try?" Preston is dead and you're not. He'd want you to have fun.

That said, certain movies that have withstood the test of time are used as examples in this book, so it would help the reader to have seen (roughly in the order of how often they appear in the book) *Casablanca*, *Rear Window, North by Northwest*, *The Bicycle Thieves*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Citizen Kane*, *A Christmas Story*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Lady Eve*, *All About Eve*, *Psycho*, *Seven*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Goldfinger*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Treat yourself—they're all great.

MYTH: Writers are born, not made. Maybe I don't have the talent.

Any normal person can write a screenplay. Even freshmen. If people had to be born knowing how to write, then babies would

write brilliantly. Trust me, I've read scripts by babies, they're a train wreck. Then the babies ask for feedback, but you can't say anything because they're babies and they cry.

For a book-length refutation of this myth please see Daniel Coyle's fascinating book *The Talent Code*, which asserts that genius is learned, not inherited.

MYTH: If I have "nothing to say" then I don't "deserve" to write.

This is a clever way of tricking yourself out of starting. Don't fall for it. Everybody has something special to say in that every individual occupies a unique vantage point vis-à-vis life, but most writers don't know what they have to say until they say it. Your job is to construct an honest, engaging narrative. "Saying something" will take care of itself. Norman Mailer once remarked to the *Paris Review* regarding "truth" that "you discover it at the point of a pencil."

MYTH: My idea should be original.

Worrying about originality is a good reason never to get past the idea stage, so avoid that trap. Maybe you'll be original and maybe you won't, but your idea will almost certainly sound trite when reduced to its simplest form. That's because just about every possible human situation has already been dramatized. Edward Albee got the last one when he wrote that play about the man in love with a goat.

Writers too often say "Oh, this idea's been done before" and use that as an excuse not to write the script. The fact is, you won't know how original your script is until it's done, so write it. Yes, "boy meets girl" has "been done"—but has it been done based on this minute in history and the specific geography you occupy? No. Don't strive to be original, strive to be honest and courageous. Originality will then take care of itself. You'll be original if you write what you know.

MYTH: The point of art is to experiment formally.

Maybe you think your script "should" break new ground in use of the medium—that it should be formally experimental and "push the envelope." Oh, banana oil. Make an honest list of your favorite movies and plays. In 98 out of 100 cases they'll conform

to the dramatic principles in this book. Very few such lists include *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *Man with a Camera*, or anything by Stan Brakhage. The idea that an art form must be reinvented with every new work is a terrible waste of centuries of hard thinking by brilliant people, many of them Alfred Hitchcock, and an ideal way to trick yourself into not writing. This is probably your first script. You're learning technique. When you've mastered technique, that's when you'll be able to break the rules in an interesting way. But your job for now is to understand the nature of dramatic writing and the principles that emerge from an examination of what works. Pablo Picasso's early paintings were skillfully realistic. Furthermore, don't let the myth that you should somehow invent a whole new style for every new work confuse you—Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and John Ford did the opposite (once they had found their voices), and that's why we call them "auteurs."

MYTH: All artists suffer. If I don't suffer I'm not doing it right. Artists drink or take drugs. Unhappiness is the fuel of creativity. It's good.

That is a sad, romantic lie that the facts don't support. A German study showed that artists are measurably happier with their work than other workers. Sure, the rejection that surrounds trying to get your work sold or produced is painful, but making art is not painful—if you allow it to be fun, which it will be if you never think about the outcome. A book called *The Power of Now* helped me with this. Yes, you'll experience moments of anxiety as you struggle for an answer, but those are a normal and necessary part of all learning and also happen in golf and French cooking. An unhappy writer is just an unhappy person who's writing. That said, an unhappy past could be good material or make you funnier.

MYTH: The point of writing is to sell what you write. I'll be happy, some day in the future, when I become a professional screenwriter.

There's a difference between "becoming a screenwriter" and "writing screenplays." The former is an identity, which writers

expect to assume like a suit of armor that protects the wearer from all future strife and unhappiness. It doesn't exist. If it did, there wouldn't be so many miserable professionals.

Happiness is found in doing things you love to do. Writing may be one of those things and so may be going on lazy picnics with your lovely friends, but make it your goal "to write," not "to be a writer." An *activity* is an achievable, sensible goal. It's under your control. What's more, writing is a day-to-day thing that we make time for if we think it sounds fun, and if it doesn't sound fun we won't do it. Becoming a professional screenwriter is an outcome, and making the outcome too important will paralyze you, distract you from the actual doing, and make you so defensive you that can't hear criticism or really see your own work. What's more, worrying about the outcome doesn't make your work better—it makes it worse (or at least slower) because you're distracted by the noise in your head. A wonderful therapist taught me to think of writing not as a grim duty or dreaded discipline but as something I make time for as an expression of love for myself. Wow, did my productivity and quality skyrocket. As for finding meaning, it emerges from taking joy in the hours of writing and not worrying about the outcome (selling, producing, or getting famous).

Imagine enjoying writing so much that the writing is its own reward. That can be yours if you see the time you spend writing as a gift that you give to yourself and you don't think about the outcome.

Furthermore, what if writing makes you smarter? Wouldn't that be worthwhile? Leonardo da Vinci apprehended details about the winging of birds in flight that weren't confirmed until centuries later with advances in photography. If you would learn to see, he said, learn to draw. Screenwriting is "drawing" life; but instead of re-creating the visual world, you're re-creating the movements of human beings through time and experience. Thus your understanding of the secrets of the human heart, how life works, and the quirks that make us tick will be strengthened and deepened.

MYTH: High standards make writing great.

"High standards" is usually code for "perfectionism," and perfectionism will keep you from writing at all. Why even begin a script that "has" to be "perfect" when we all know perfection is unattainable? What fool would begin an impossible task? Who could write with an inner voice screaming, "Is it good enough? *Is it good enough!!??*" Yikes. You won't write at all if you aim for perfection, or in any case you'll write less than you would if you forgot about perfection. Forget good or bad, and choose instead to give yourself the gift of spending time creatively without worrying about the outcome. Ironically, not worrying about whether your art is good will make it better. Try it just this once. You'll see.

MYTH: I don't have time to write.

This is a tricky one, and my therapist taught me a countertrick. She had me start a "time diary." I bought one of those fancy little Moleskin notebooks (a 99-cent job would have done as well but those Moleskins do feel good in the hand) and tucked it in my jeans. For a month, every time I began a new activity, I simply jotted down the time: "8 A.M., rise. 8:15, paint kitchen. 8:30, feed Komodo dragon." Try it. You will become mindful of your time and (probably automatically) change how you use it. This is a life-altering and actually quite disturbing exercise, so prepare to have your brain exploded. The good news is that *you will find time*, and then you'll discover that even a few hours here and there can eventually add up to a script. By the way, a lot of successful writers spend much less time writing than you think. Arthur Miller completed act I of *Death of a Salesman* in less than a day. Noël Coward wrote *Private Lives* in four days—after spending ten days sketching it out (note that the planning and plotting took longer than the actual writing of scenes, which is quite proper).

MYTH: Real writers have regular work habits. A "real" writer gets up at 5:00 A.M. and works for exactly four hours, preferably while wearing a lucky bowling shirt, which is never washed. I can't write regularly because my procrastination is incurable.

Different writers have different schedules. Myself, I find that first-thing-in-the-morning energy gives me better concentration

and that three or four solid hours of writing is a very, very good day and takes a lot out of me (in a good way). I also find that going back and polishing the work that I did the previous day gives me a running start on the new stuff that I'm going to write that day. But I'm not you. Some people say that writing should be regularly scheduled, but that advice might not work for people who are, say, responsible for small children. And if you take the attitude that writing is fun, then you won't say to yourself, "Oh, I only have forty minutes before dinner—I can't get anything done in that time." Instead you'll say, "Oh, goodie—forty minutes to write." Still, I admit that it's even more fun when you have time to develop a flow.

MYTH: The last, most pernicious myth of all is that writing is magical: if the muses desert you that's that. "Writer's block" is normal, inevitable, and all writers sometimes suffer from it. It shows what a romantic, creative, artistic figure you are.

Baloney.

"Inspiration is a farce that poets have invented to give themselves importance," the great French playwright Jean Anouilh said in a 1962 *New York Times* essay. "Inspiration" and "muse" are just fancy words that writers use for thinking up a solution to the problem at hand. When they can't, they blame "writer's block," which is not a scientific term and doesn't appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. When people say it, what they really mean is procrastination, the stickiest problem in the mental game of screenwriting. Yes, some procrastination is due to poor time management. Maybe, like me, you're a person who puts others' needs before your own or sometimes scatter your energies. Some procrastination is due to problems of life. It can be tough to write when you're distracted by your greedy creditors.

However, a lot of procrastination is due to confusion over what to write next: you don't have an outline or have a faulty outline. Writing a good outline or revising a bad one solves that kind of procrastination. You'll soon learn to do that.

The rest of procrastination is due to the yak-yak-yak of the inner voice, stopping us from doing what we want to do by telling us that we can't do it or it won't be fun.

Here's the takeaway: "writer's block" is just a fancy way of saying "I'm not writing" and has two causes.

1. Worrying about the outcome: "This will be hard." "My script will stink." "It won't be perfect." "It won't sell." "Papa will never respect me because I'm a woman." Not thinking about the outcome and instead focusing on the moment-to-moment sport of writing will solve that.
2. Not knowing what to write; not knowing what comes next. The blank page. Putting work into planning and plotting your screenplay in advance will solve that, and this book will teach you how.

So, now that I've disabused you of every destructive myth about writing, art, and the life of the artist, defeated procrastination (OK, it's a lifelong battle, but we've made a start), and forgiven you for not writing at dawn, let's relax and get started on that screenplay. First, you'll need an idea.

THE IDEA

The key to successful dramatic writing is to make major structural decisions in advance and then stick to those decisions as you write, instead of wandering off on some whimsical tangent. *Decide what your story is about and make it be about that*. There are two parts to that statement: (1) deciding and (2) playing out your decision. Let's tackle the first part: deciding.

SO MUCH TO WRITE ABOUT

It's a big world out there. You could write about anything in the universe. You have to decide what you *will* write about so that you can exclude what you won't write about. You have to make decisions. And you have to make the big decisions first. This book is about the decisions that need to be made in constructing a screenplay and the order in which those decisions are most effectively made. First you make the big decisions, then the medium-sized decisions, and last of all the small, moment-to-moment decisions.

Your first decision is your idea.

PREDICTING WHETHER AN IDEA WILL SUCCEED

Working with beginning writers has taught me two things.

1. A great idea isn't a great idea if *that* writer can't write it. Some ideas would be good for one writer but not another. Sometimes inexperienced writers generate a catchy "high concept" but are not ready to tackle it because, for example, it's outside their experience. Beginning writers

aren't facile pros who can make just anything work—they don't yet have the mastery of craft.

2. An idea that isn't "dramatizable" is not really an idea at all—it's just a gimmick. There's a difference between, say, a concept, a premise, or an inspiration and a thought-through idea that will "play," as they say in the theatre.

In other words, the idea has to be right for the writer and right for the medium. Shaping an inspiration into a dramatizable idea is a skill that we'll attempt to learn in this chapter, but there's no substitute for experience. Studies of chess masters show that the difference between a master and a beginner is that a master can quickly compute the ramifications of any possible move and the neophyte can't. With lightning speed, the chess master can predict how a choice "plays out," having been down that road before. The master's genius is in the ability quickly to imagine all the possible solutions to a problem and just as quickly dismiss the ones that won't work. Then the master can spend more time pursuing the ones that *might* work. You're not there yet, but even the beginner can shape an idea in a way that helps ensure success. Ideas with a high likelihood of panning out tend to have characteristics in common, which we'll discuss next.

THE DRAMATIZABLE IDEA VERSUS THE MOVIE GIMMICK

A dramatizable idea is one that will "play": with reasonable ease it will yield thirty-five to eighty ideas for scenes of conflict. Sometimes an idea that sounds great isn't. Beware the common pitfall of mistaking a movie gimmick for a dramatizable idea. Everyone will say that your gimmick is a great idea for a movie, but withhold judgment until it yields a spine and step outline (which you'll learn to do later).

Different Ideas Suit Different Literary Forms

You'll succeed more readily with your first screenplay if you pick an idea suited to becoming a movie. If I contemplate an oleander bush bursting with blooms outside my office window and ex-

perience a transcendent but temporary sense of the universe's generosity, I should write a poem. If I have a chance encounter on the bus with a homeless man whom I discover to be a person of extraordinary sensitivity and lucidity just before he walks out of my life and I am left sitting in my bus seat forever altered by this brief experience because of an "epiphany," that's probably a short story. It's narrative, brief, somewhat internal, and resonant beyond its size. If I want to examine in minute detail the interior mental struggles of a stoic, middle-aged businessman coming to terms with his teenage daughter's lingering terminal illness, I'll need a novel because the story is internal and protracted.

The novel can tell almost any kind of story, but the kinds of stories that can be told on film are definitely limited by certain inherent characteristics of the medium. Movies are made of external action. They are "superficial" in that they deal with life's surfaces. Long internal monologues aren't acceptable to the movie audience yet are quite normal in the novel. Also, movies tend to be more strictly limited in length than the novel. The human dream cycle is ninety minutes long; coincidentally, movies during the Golden Age of Hollywood also tended to be that long. Novels may take weeks to read and can be as complex as you like; movies and plays must be time-limited, Andy Warhol's *Sleep* notwithstanding.

THE HOLLYWOOD CONCEPT VERSUS THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

The cinema is a big tent. It has room for popcorn blockbusters and tiny indies. A lot of people think that the smart thing to do is to write the "high-concept" movie, and there are certainly things to be said for it. Studios are looking for high concepts—hooky ideas that can be expressed in a single sentence and movies that match the currently successful formulas.

High-concept movies ideally are a little familiar and a little different: "*The Karate Kid* but with sumo wrestling." They're enough like things that have come before that they make the powers-that-be comfortable, but they're different enough not to seem tired. One way to achieve that is with "blank meets blank."

When people are pitching ideas or scripts in Hollywood, they often use something that a producer friend of mine calls "crosstimations." That is, they say that the script is "something meets something else," with the somethings being hit movies: if you're trying to sell something based on its being like something else, that something else had better have been successful. It's fun to combine hit movies randomly. *The Avengers* meets *Gone with the Wind*: superheroes go back in time to the Civil War.

Another method is to take stories that have been done before and make them over for today. *10 Things I Hate about You* was based on *The Taming of the Shrew. Clueless* retreaded Jane Austen's *Emma*. There are tons of story ideas out there: *Madame Bovary*, Greek myths, and old plays that have fallen into the public domain. (Ideas are in the public domain and cannot be copyrighted. Even the copyrightable expressions of ideas eventually fall into the public domain, so *Dracula* and Charles Dickens are easy pickings.)

However, when borrowing from the classics you cannot slavishly follow the original plot. Stories structured for an earlier time must be tailored to fit contemporary life or else their story logic goes awry. Today, instead of a scarlet letter, Hester Prynne's problem would be finding affordable day care on the rock-bottom wage that she gets in the service industry.

Is the Personal Story Best for the First-Time Screenwriter?

The high concept is usually "big," which often means lots of action and special effects, so you need to sell it to a rich major Hollywood studio. It cannot be produced independently. Moreover, the high concept is usually harder to get right because it's something outside the writer's experience, often involving police inspectors, professional whale trainers, and nuns with a knack for kung fu. You lose your momentum when you keep stopping to research whales or to think up a clever "whammy."

I usually advise writers working on a first script that the high-concept or genre film is probably out of reach. Better to choose a small, personal idea that's inspired by your own experience and takes place in a world that you know.

The idea can be tweaked to make it more high concept or hooky and may even fit into an existing genre as you develop it. Great! But the important thing is that it should emerge from what you know, because that's what's easiest to write—and right now you need all the help that you can get.

A lot can be said for personal stories. They're unique. They feel "real"—the specificity, sincerity, and depth of understanding shine through. If you choose to write characters based on people you know (or types you know) and set your story in a milieu that you know it will probably be deeper and more convincing. If you are writing your story out of your own experiences, things only *you* know, then you can write that story better than anyone else in the world. Even Tennessee Williams couldn't write about your mother better than you could. Your experiences and point of view are unique: if your script comes out of them, then the script will be unique. Another advantage of writing about the kind of people you know is that you don't have to stretch to create their dialogue. You may speak English as a second language and feel that you don't have the verbal skills necessary to write a screenplay—unless, say, you write about a family that speaks English as a second language. You may not be able to dramatize a plausible exchange between Princess Margaret and Noël Coward, but you can certainly write a conflict between Mom and Dad over money.

Writing the sincere personal story can help you find your voice. Producers love a unique new voice. Better writing means a better writing sample. Remember, producers are looking for good ideas *and* good writers. But if they had to choose, they'd choose good writers, because a good writer can be hired to write one of the producer's ideas or literary properties. A well-written script that isn't high concept and doesn't sell for a million dollars can nevertheless be a great writing sample that wins contests, lands an agent, and gets assignments. And if you don't find a producer with the vision to love your unique new voice, well, the new digital technologies make independent production more attainable than ever before.

Most importantly, the personal script is usually the best choice for the new writer because it's the *easiest t*o write. It comes out

of what you already know—people you know, human types you know, and worlds you know. If you're a college student and write about college life, well, you don't have to go to a library to find out about college life. If you write about a blacksmith in 1473 you have to research all about the fifteenth century, smithing, and heaven knows what all else, but it still won't be as convincing as a script about love in the freshman dorm.

Avoid Research

If a scene is necessary to your script and you don't know how it would go, then of course you must do research. I'm not against all research. It's helpful. A little research into, say, what a plumber would actually tell a customer under given circumstances adds immeasurably to the authenticity of the flooded kitchen scene. Not to do research that is necessary is an error. However, research is terribly time-consuming. For beginning screenwriters, who find it hard enough to start the process as it is, research can be an endless swamp. Once you start you can be tied up at the library for years. When are you done? There's always more to know. The longer you research, the longer you put off writing, until research turns from a prelude into an excuse never to write. So I insist that my university students, when writing the first screenplay, choose a topic that requires absolutely no research. If your topic requires extensive research, by definition you aren't writing what you know.

Too much research can be a bad idea even if you're writing on a historical topic. A great playwright once said that if he needed to write a play about a great figure of history he would read an encyclopedia article and that's all—the rest he could make up. He didn't want to be constricted by too many facts; his responsibility was to himself as an artist and to his audience, not to literal history. Your responsibility is to tell an engrossing story; facts are the bailiwick of historians.

The Hazards of Genre

Genre can be a false refuge of writers who are afraid that they have nothing to say. They think that writing a genre film will be

easier. In fact, it can be an added burden, when the demands of the genre distort or supplant the logic of your story.

One job in writing the first screenplay is to find your voice as a writer. Another is to learn the basic principles of dramatic construction. Having to deal with a lot of quite arbitrary narrative conventions associated with, say, the action movie, horror film, or western just gets in the way of your freedom to make decisions consonant with story logic, dramatic principles, and what you know about human life. Genre is another layer of complexity that you don't need when writing the first screenplay. Learning the principles of screenwriting is a plateful. It's plenty for now. I'm not against high concept or genre. I'm just saying that for your first screenplay, the one where you master the process, choose content that you already know well. It's hard enough to structure a story without worrying about genre conventions.

YOUR LIFE IS MORE INTERESTING THAN YOU THINK

So now we understand that the best ideas for the beginning screenwriter are those found in your own backyard, that it's crucial to pick a subject that you don't need to research, and that it's best to pick some area of life with which you are completely familiar.

Unfortunately, you think that you're boring and couldn't possibly interest anyone else. Paradoxically, that's a rather egotistical idea, because it stems from an inability to place yourself in the shoes of others. To someone living in Port-au-Patois, your life is thrillingly exotic. Exploit it: you will write a story that no one else can write as well as you can because it's your story and you're the one who knows it.

Let me give you a perfect example of a student finding the right idea. A shy Chicana sophomore whom we'll call Veronica insisted that she was completely boring and therefore had absolutely nothing to write. I told her to visit me during my office hours. When she sat down, I said, "Tell me your entire life story from beginning to end. Something in it will suggest dramatic possibilities."

Here was the first sentence out of her mouth: "When I was a little girl I worked with my mother and father as a migrant farm laborer, picking fruit in central California."

To this I replied, "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

To her, boring. To me, riveting! All that remained was to shape the experience into a dramatizable idea, and she did.

Maybe you haven't worked as a migrant laborer, but you've done *something* even though it may seem dreary to you because you're so familiar with it. Have you been a high school football player? Did you go to a summer camp for fat kids? Take care of younger siblings because your meth-addict mom couldn't? There's a wonderful quotation usually attributed to H. L. Mencken: "There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers." Emily Dickinson never left the house yet wrote poetry that we still read.

So write what you know, but structure it so that it holds an audience's interest. We'll talk about how to do that in the next chapter, on plot. For now, let's talk a little more about having the confidence to tell the personal story.

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

People choose cheesy ideas and lowbrow genres because they're afraid that they'll bungle the ideas they care about. Such writers suffer from paralyzing perfectionism, so they choose a lesser idea, write it, and never get around to the idea that they care about because the script based on the cheesy idea stank and stopped them cold. The problem is that a cheesy idea limits from the start how good the script can ever become. Why do that? Students often want to "save" their "best idea" for later. They're afraid that they won't do it perfectly. No script is ever perfect. If you wait until you can do it perfectly you'll never start. Start, confident in the knowledge that it won't be perfect. It will merely be as good as you can make it. Better than that is not possible even for George Bernard Shaw. Guard against "I can't do justice to this material" or "it's too important to screw up," or "I'll save this subject until I'm a better writer and can give it the skill it deserves." What those excuses come down to is "I'm just going to

screw it up so I won't write at all," which is predicting a negative outcome and using that as an excuse to stop before you start. Go with your best idea.

"Boy Meets Girl" Is News

An old story in screenwriting tells about the writer who woke up every morning convinced that the idea he dreamed last night would make a brilliant script if only he could remember it. His friend says, "Put a pad of paper next to the bed." The next day the writer says that once again he's forgotten a super idea, but the friend reminds him about the pad. The writer rushes back to the bedroom and looks at what he jotted last night. "Boy meets girl."

The joke is that the guy thought his dreams were great and they weren't. The *lesson* is that, at bottom, there aren't that many movie premises in the world and lots of them boil down to A pursues B romantically. That's an important thing for the beginning screenwriter to know. Often a student will think about dramatizing, say, the love affair that she had as a freshman but will say, "Oh, I can't do a love story—that's been done." Of course it has. Dramatic writing is about people pursuing goals, and people have always and will always pursue a few eternal goals: survival, glory, justice, revenge, riches, and love.

Yes, boy meets girl has been done before, but we haven't seen how boys meet girls in college right here and now, which is different from all other times and places. Be specific and you will be unique—but you will also be universal.

Specificity Is Universality

If you're writing honestly and specifically about a certain place and time, the universality will emerge automatically. In fact, ironically (and counterintuitively), the more specific you are, the more universal you'll be. You don't have to *try* to be universal; if your heart is honest and your observation is acute, you will be.

Small Stories

Students ask, "How can I write what I know when nothing big has ever happened to me?"

Even very small subjects can be interesting and suspenseful if the story is constructed properly and if we're made to understand that the character desperately desires to achieve this goal. Cesare Zavattini, the great Italian screenwriter, pointed out that you could write an exciting story about a woman buying a pair of shoes. The trick is to make us understand the woman's world and why she wants the shoes so badly. Zavattini, of course, wrote *The Bicycle Thieves*. Many consider it the greatest film ever made, yet it's about finding a stolen bicycle. But we are made to understand that after a long period of unemployment the man has found a job that requires a bicycle and that without the bicycle his young family will starve. Obviously, he cares about that bicycle—and so do we.

Another film about finding a stolen bicycle is *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Pee-wee loves his bike for aesthetic reasons—it's his pride and joy—and badly wants it back. His absurd and inappropriate passion for the goofy, campy bike becomes a great comic asset to the film (because inappropriate and disproportionate reactions are funny). As long as audiences know how much he cherished the bike, they'll go with it.

Young Isn't Bad

You may think that you're too young to know anything about life, but movie audiences are basically thirteen to twenty-five and are interested in their own age group. Young writers have an advantage over more seasoned screenwriters in that they can write about their age group more authentically—therefore studio executives like to see scripts by new young writers. (If you're an older writer, remember that most of the bankable stars tend to be older and writing for them makes your story castable. It's good to be young, and it's good to be old.)

Your Experiences

Even if you trust me when I tell you that your experiences and the worlds that you know are interesting, you still have to identify what part of your past would make an interesting story. One way is to write a four- or five-page autobiographical sketch and examine it for dramatic material. Here are some areas that might be particularly fruitful.

FAMILY SECRETS

These have the advantage of being easy to call to mind and artistically interesting but the disadvantage of being painful and embarrassing. Was Mom a drunk? Did Dad die of AIDS? The history of twentieth-century American drama is a catalogue of scandalous family secrets: *The Glass Menagerie* (mental illness), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (drug addiction), and *Death of a Salesman* (a failed career) all started as hit plays and became acclaimed films. Happy or poignant memories work too: for example, *Life with Father* and *A Christmas Story*.

THE SENSITIVE YET FUNNY ENSEMBLE FILM

These are harder to structure because they're ensemble pieces (we'll talk later about the structural problems that ensemble films pose), but they often work well for young writers. When we're young, we tend to move in a pack. It's one of the great pleasures of youth. Young people therefore are often moved to chronicle a group of friends, usually at an important turning point (for example, graduation). *Dazed and Confused* and *American Graffiti* are good examples of this kind of film.

THE RAUNCHY YOUTHFUL HIJINKS FILM

Were you a prankster? Born to be bad? Your youthful indiscretions might make a fine comedy, along the lines of African American writer-director Reginald Hudlin's charming *House Party* or *Bachelor Party*, the raunchy farce that made Tom Hanks a movie star. *Porky's*, *Animal House*, *American Pie*, and *Sex Drive* are other examples of the category.

COMING OF AGE DRAMAS

Stories that deal with the loss of innocence and the coming of adulthood can be quite beautiful. *Member of the Wedding*, *East of Eden*, and even *The Karate Kid* are examples.

The Personal Story Is Not a Diary, So Lie

When I encourage students to write personal stories that come out of their own experiences they sometimes think that means they can't make up anything. Please, lie! Feel free to invent, heighten, or change anything. Write about your love affair with that boy when you were a freshman, but the story doesn't have to end with him dumping you at the Beta lingerie party. He can be run over by a Bentley driven by a madly attractive financier. "You've just run over my fiancé . . . you naughty hunk of financier."

Your experiences are just raw material for you to mold and color as dramatic necessity dictates. If you want to make them more vivid or "dramatic," go ahead. Take the essence of life and heighten the conflict. Add a wedding or a murder. The point is that your story be rooted in a world you know and understand deeply, so it will contain truth even though it's not literally true. The novelist John Irving, in the *Paris Review*, talked about the relationship between the source material and finished script this way: "I begin by telling the truth . . . of course, what unsettles me and bores me is the absence of plot . . . And so I find a little something that I exaggerate a little; gradually I have an autobiography on its way to becoming a lie. The lie is, of course, more interesting." What he's saying is: take life, add plot.

STARTING WITH CHARACTER VERSUS STARTING WITH PLOT

Sometimes your script idea will come to you more or less complete—with story and character. Sometimes not.

It is said that in coming up with a story you can begin with character or plot. Then you say either, "OK, I have such-and-such a character, now what would that person *do*?" or "OK, I want to

write a story about a person who does such-and-such, what kind of *character* would that be?"

That is a somewhat artificial distinction; plot is character and character is plot. A plot is just characters doing things, and the things they do reveal their character. Characters don't exist outside of what they do and say in the course of the story, and the story doesn't exist beyond what is done and said by the characters.

For me, it's all organic and simultaneous, but let's examine starting with character. Say that your Great Aunt Esther, a brassy, pushy busybody, always sticks up for the underdog and never misses a Mets game on the radio. She's an ideal comic character, which is to say someone we love but also mock. Now she needs a goal. Hmmm. Maybe she sees some injustice in her neighborhood, such as an all-white softball team that won't accept people of color. She decides to put together a softball team of the people who are excluded from the other team—and maybe her goal is to beat out that team for the championship.

The comedy in particular benefits from beginning with character. Comedy often results from a rigidly defined character clashing with a context—the fish out of water. That's why so many stand-up comics get sitcoms: when you have a well-defined comic persona, it's relatively easy to plug it into plot after plot or episode after episode.

However, you can also start with plot and come up with characters who will do the things that you need them to do. Suppose that you have a plot idea about a guy who meets a stranger on a train. The stranger proposes trading murders—he'll kill your inconvenient wife, you'll eliminate his wealthy father. You think that he's kidding until he eliminates the wife you wanted dead but would never have strangled yourself. In a way this stranger has hijacked your identity. What kind of guy gets his identity hijacked? Someone who's watery and vague, whose identity is so weak that even his name is generic: Guy! Guy Haines is the tennis player who gets yanked around by a psychopath in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*.

DEFINE THE TERRITORY THEN MAP A ROUTE THROUGH IT

Very often your inspiration—the thing you want to write about—is big and inchoate. Maybe it's a relationship, a tumultuous part of your life, or a fascinating milieu or arena that you're lucky enough to know all about. Chances are the material doesn't present itself in ready-made dramatic form. For one thing, life takes a long time but a movie lasts under two hours.

Of course, some films (and many plays) take place more or less in "real time"—for example, *The Breakfast Club* or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But they've been carefully crafted to do that. Ninety minutes of everyday life would rarely be so compressed, pithy, and pivotal.

In dramatizing a large territory such as your relationship with your father the tough marine sergeant, consider that you've spent thousands of hours with Dad. So you have this pile of experiences that spans years of your life and you somehow have to translate it into a series of scenes in a movie.

It helps to think of the grouped-together experiences as looking like a territory on a map. So many little dot-cities on the map: to screenwriters, however, the dots are scenes, moments, conflicts—the building blocks of the thing that they're making.

But which moments and in what order? You have to select. And you have to choose wisely because you have so little time in which to tell your story. Maybe you choose the Big Scenes from over the years or maybe you pick a single day and make it stand for the whole.

You need to chart a route through the territory that will get you where you're going but will also give people a view of the territory. You're selecting sites to visit, and you want those sites to reveal this world. After all, the reason you're writing the script is probably precisely to show us this little milieu, be it a marriage or a summer working at a water park. It has lots to offer: characters, flavor, time, and place. We're interested in all that—but only as long as the story moves forward.

Therefore you have to move across the territory in a purpose-

ful way. You must map a route that will take you from one side of the territory to the other. But you won't cover every inch of the territory, because this is a movie so you're in a hurry. Drama needs to move forward, ever forward, or it dies. Even when delving into the past, dramas are moving forward. Audiences need to feel that the story is going somewhere and that the writer knows where.

The points you pick to hit along the way—the scenes, the moments, the conflicts—need to show us the flavor of the territory and at the same time enact a changing situation advancing toward some sort of resolution. It's a tall order, so you'll have to combine the moments, reimagine moments, invent moments, reshape the progression of events, and intensify the conflicts. That's OK! You never said this was "true." Even if you did—even if it's a famous true story—you have the right and the duty to reshape it into a *better story*.

THE IDEA AT A GLANCE

Especially if you're writing your first screenplay, your idea probably should emerge from something that you already know all about, so you won't get tangled up in endless research. If you played field hockey at Bennington, well, what an interesting group of women you must have known. Throw in a love story, murder, championship, or the most inspiring coach you've ever known and you're ready to go. Don't worry whether the places you've been and people you've known are tired and boring to you—to the audience they're new. Write what you know. It's easier, usually artistically better, and can even turn out to be a smart career move.

THE SPINE

A Chinese proverb says: "If you want an audience, start a fight." Absolutely. Conflict is the key to a dramatizable idea. All scenes in a screenplay should be scenes of conflict.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT AND PERSUASION

Conflict is the fight that occurs when two forces, usually two humans, oppose each other. One wants one thing, the other wants another. That's what is meant by "clash of wills." They may battle with light sabers or bitchy wisecracks, but it's all conflict. The weapons may be as overt as a nuclear strike or as subtle as an innuendo. One entity wants one thing, another wants something else, and they hash it out.

Character versus Whatever

You heard in English classes that conflict could be character versus character, character versus nature, character versus society, and character versus himself or herself. Some of these take some jiggling to work on film.

Character versus character is the easiest and most common. Rock Hudson admires Doris Day and wants to deflower her. She thinks that he's a jerk and defends her maidenhead. Who will prevail? Bruce Willis wants to stop the terrorist from blowing up the building—it's Bruce versus the terrorist.

Sometimes the opposition is not a human but a force of nature. What's at stake is often survival. In *The Birds* Tippi Hedren wants to live, but the winged ones want her dead. Leonardo DiCaprio wants to survive the wreck of the *Titanic*, but the sea

wants him to drown. Obviously, the sea cannot consciously form a goal, but what matters from *a dramatic* point of view is that the sea acts as though it wants to drown Leonardo. It gets cold, it sends waves, and it pulls him down.

Character versus society is harder to play because "society" is so general a term. Dramatic choices must be specific. In *Gentleman's Agreement* Gregory Peck battles a system of ingrained anti-Semitism as a gentile journalist posing as a Jew and writing an exposé. But it's tricky. What is "society"? How do I fight society as a whole? Where do I punch it? Society must be embodied in a specific person or series of persons representing society's prejudices and institutions for character versus society to work as a dramatic conflict. In the end, it becomes character versus character: the journalist versus his fiancée as the main embodiment of society's prejudice.

Internal conflict of the character versus himself or herself variety is best reserved for novels. The screen requires conflicts that can be photographed: pictures of the surface of life. Those surfaces imply inner life but cannot directly convey it with the suppleness of prose fiction. This is not to say that screen characters cannot be internally conflicted, but for us to see them on film those internal conflicts must be played out in external conflicts.

Conflict Equals Persuasion through Talk and/or Action

Most of the time the conflict, the clash of wills, is some form of persuasion. That's when I want you to do something and you don't want to do it. Many of William Shakespeare's most compelling scenes and finest speeches are about convincing someone of one thing or another. Courtroom dramas are about persuading the jury. Romantic comedies are about persuading your love object to love you back.

In movies very often the conflict is verbal and consists of trying to talk someone into something: talking a potential suicide off the ledge, maneuvering someone into bed, or persuading the killer to surrender the knife. I want one thing, you want another; I try to persuade you to go with what I want.

However, persuasion isn't just talk. A fistfight is persuasion. The hero tries to persuade the villain to stop his villainy—with his left hook. A fine director I know encourages her actors to try to discern in every scene—and even every line—what the character is trying to make the other character feel. We get people to feel a certain way so that they'll do what we want. Emotion in drama is about persuasion. A teacher makes a student feel confident so that he'll write well. A mom makes her son feel guilty so he'll take out the trash. A boy tries to make a girl feel appreciated so that she'll kiss him. It's all persuasion. And persuasion is conflict.

Externalizing Conflict

One difference between a novel and a drama is that in a novel conflict may be internal, while a drama must externalize conflict. That doesn't mean that you can't write about internal struggles; it just means that you have to bring them out into the world where your audience can see them.

For example, suppose you have a character who cannot decide whether or not she prefers women as sexual partners. You could write a 600-page novel exploring her stream-of-consciousness ruminations on the subject; however, unless you intend to revive the soliloquy, a play or screenplay can't take us directly inside a character's head as a novel might. To be dramatic or, more specifically, cinematic, a conflict must be *externalized*—brought out of the character's head and into life.

How might we externalize the conflict of our sexually divided heroine? Perhaps she is pursued by a man and also by a woman. Both pressure her—try to *persuade* her—to commit. The conflict thus becomes external, brought into the world of surfaces, where it can be dramatized.

Dramatic Conflict versus Trumped-Up Conflict

Real conflict occurs when characters do what they'd really do if they truly wanted what they supposedly want in the circumstances of the story. OK, read that sentence again, and then I'll explain it.

Dramatic conflict is interesting because it has a point. The character wants something. She struggles against opposition to get it. The conflict matters because it has a purpose.

If the struggle is not *for* something or is not believably what a character would do to get the thing she wants, it feels pointless and fake and won't engage an audience. Dramatic conflict should always be in pursuit of a goal, not simply for its own sake. One student wrote a script about a guy who went to a bar, got into a fight, was kicked out, went to another bar, picked another fight, got kicked out, and on and on.

"You said the script should have conflict," he argued, but he came to understand that conflict that's not about the character going after what he wants (is merely gratuitous and doesn't grow out of the logic of the story and the character) is trumped up and does you no good because the audience doesn't care about it.

Here's the test: Ask yourself, "If I really wanted what this character wants, what would I do?"

Even Allies and Lovers Engage in Conflict

You might say, "My scene is between two characters who are allies or lovers, so obviously they wouldn't have conflict." Wrong. All scenes must include conflict. Even two lovers crazy about each other might argue about which one loves the other more. Perhaps the lovers desire each other, but he wants to wait until they get home while she wants him right now in the sailboat. Seduction is conflict. One wants it, the other doesn't. (That's why seduction is dramatic but the sex act itself usually isn't—hence the term "gratuitous sex.")

Allies conflict. People pursuing the same goal will disagree over how to get it. In *The Heat* (and every other buddy cop movie ever made all the way back to *Lethal Weapon*), Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy both want to catch the bad guy, but they constantly argue tactics. I want to catch the bad guy methodically; you want to catch him recklessly. We have to hash out our differences if we're going to work together successfully.

Conflict Takes Many Forms

Sometimes the conflict isn't obvious, but it's there. Suppose Marie thinks that her husband, Joe, is cheating on her. She follows him to see what he's up to when he's allegedly "working late." We have all seen scenes of people tailing people in movies, so you may ask, "Where's the conflict? It's an engaging, exciting scene, yet I don't see the conflict." It's in the clash of wills. Marie wants to see what Joe is up to, while Joe doesn't want her to know. Even if he doesn't realize that he's being followed, we nevertheless understand that he doesn't want to be caught, so the situation is still conflict: another variation of I want one thing but you want another.

Now that you understand what conflict is, you can begin to think about dramatizing your idea: taking the vague material that you're interested in addressing and giving it a dramatic shape.

THE TAIL MUSTN'T WAG THE DOG

A lot of people think that constructing a movie is just closing your eyes and dreaming and then putting down the fragments in exactly the order in which they occur to you. Probably not, unless you're Luis Buñuel or Federico Fellini.

In fact, good dramatic construction needs conscious shaping—preferably in advance. First come the major decisions such as who's the hero, what he wants, and what stands in his way. Then come the decisions as to what scenes, moments, and conflicts will embody the journey. And then you'll decide how each individual scene should progress and what should be said and done in the course of the scene. Then—and only then—is it time to think about visual images that will serve the story.

To think about *visual images* first and then make everything follow in the wake of your divine vision is called the tail wagging the dog. After all, the dog should be wagging the tail, not the other way around, right? You decide what the movie is about then decide what the characters are going to say and do, and then the director decides what the shot is going to be.

Many directors think purely visually, almost to the exclusion

of character and story. They dream up images, fall in love with them, and want to twist the story to include them no matter how the story howls in pain. They don't get that if they create a strong structure of strong characters in strong scenes of conflict they'll think of new images, better images, more organic images than the ones that occurred to them before the script was written—and before there even was a story. If you're a director writing your first screenplay, don't let the tail wag the dog. Don't let visual images that occur to you before you begin writing become sacrosanct to the point that you mangle story and character to accommodate them. It's foolish to fall in love with a visual image or a "moment" and then try to make your screenplay conform to it. You end up contorting and distorting the whole story just so you can keep some little inspiration.

The great thing about inspiration is that it's an endless stream: if one inspiration doesn't serve your story, you'll come up with another that does. The critical thing is to create a unified whole. That means making the artistic decisions in the right order, beginning with hero and goal and ending with lines of dialogue, actions, and visual images. If it doesn't fit into the unified whole, it has to go.

That's what's meant by "kill your darlings." It doesn't mean take out everything that you especially like; it means that the scene or line that has to be cut because it doesn't serve the whole is invariably something you love.

DRAMATIC NARRATIVES HAVE SHAPE THROUGH TIME

The stern goddess Screenwriting demands structure. Just as a great painting has composition and proportion on a two-dimensional plane and sculpture and architecture have composition and proportion in three-dimensional space, screenwriting has composition and proportion *through the dimension of time*. Painting and sculpture don't have time. Screenplays (and music) do: therefore they must change and progress as they move through time. Certain dramatic proportions and shapes are more beautiful and satisfying than others, which any painter

will tell you is true of painting too. In screenwriting the shaping of the sequence of events as we move through time is called "plotting" or "creating structure."

Excluding What You Won't Want to Write About

To control plot effectively you need to plan. The "spine" is a tool for deciding what your script will be about. And part of deciding what your script is about is deciding what it *isn't* about. The universe is infinite. You can not only write about everything that exists now but also about anything that ever existed and your imagination of what yet may come. That's a lot of raw material. So your decision is what to write about but also what *not* to write about. By making firm decisions as to what your story is about and sticking to those decisions, you automatically exclude everything else—simultaneously sharpening your focus and saving yourself a lot of work.

Shaping the Material

In shaping "real" (or imagined or historical) events into a story, writers are forced to strike a balance between two goods: a vigorous shape, full of conflict and shorn of irrelevancies, versus the textures, moments, characters, and feelings that made the writer want to write the piece in the first place.

Sometimes you need to be gentle, tugging or nudging the story into place. At other times you want to transform it more completely—make it more "fictional" or "plotty." Both approaches are OK. We writers do a sort of delicate dance between our inspiration—the world of experiences, memories, and opinions that we want to communicate—and the form into which we want to shape them. It's the old opposition between form and content. In the end they become a single inseparable entity, but it helps to think of them separately. Depending upon your taste, either form or content can take precedence. Form can be thought of as something rigid into which we pour content. It can also be thought of as a set of principles that we use to guide us as we delicately knead and nudge the content into some kind of shape.

Some might say form "should be dictated by content." To a degree that's certainly true, but it's not as true for the screenwriter as it is, say, for the novelist, because the novel is a much more malleable form. A novel can be 90 pages or 900 pages. A novel doesn't require you to consume it in one sitting, but a movie does. Movies have to work harder to hold our attention, which means more structure. If a novel is unclear, we can go back and reread it, but you can't rewind the film in a movie house. Also, you can read a novel closely or just skim a passage that bores you, while a movie unfolds at a fixed rate, so more effort must be made to predict and hold the audience's interest. Novelists are accustomed to a lot of luxurious freedoms and often find it hard to submit to the restrictions of dramatic writing. (Poets and journalists, in contrast, are used to working in literary forms with rules, which is why they sometimes take to screenwriting more readily than prose fiction writers.) The fortunate novelist can include anything that strikes her fancy, but the screenwriter has to make choices, and to make the big choices first.

This chapter is about the biggest decisions, the first decisions that dictate everything to follow. These decisions are what we call the "spine" of your story. Making these decisions—firmly, in advance—will help you shape your raw material (experiences, territory, thoughts, impressions) into a compelling story that will hold the attention of the audience.

THE SPINE

What's the number one way to hold an audience's attention? As William Goldman famously wrote in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, stick to the spine of your story, meaning stay close to what the story's about. Don't wander off on tangents. What you exclude is as important as what you include. A disciplined plot that disdains irrelevancies is more effective than a plot that meanders about, merrily including whatever happens to amuse the writer.

The spine answers a set of questions that enable you to draw boundaries around your story. It's a way of saying, "I'm writing about *this*, so I don't have to worry about *that*." It's akin to what

some writers call "the hero's journey" or what stage directors call "the through-line." Here are the questions you must answer, but don't answer them yet:

What is my HOOK?

Who is my HERO?

What is my hero's GOAL?

What is the CENTRAL QUESTION in the mind of the audience?

What is the hero's CENTRAL CONFLICT?

Notice that the spine makes no mention of theme. Starting with theme is confusing. Forget theme for now.

Now You Can Begin Excluding

A properly completed spine answers these questions, not with a few paragraphs or even a few sentences but rather with a handful of words. In shaping the story we first boil it down to its absolute essence, define that essence, and then build it back out from there. In other words, in answering these questions, for now forget about the ten notebooks that you may have filled with ideas for your script.

Art is about choosing. Art is selection. Art is making decisions: I include this, I exclude that. This is light, that is shadow. This is inside the frame; that is outside the frame. You are about to make a set of decisions as to what is most important in your script, and those decisions will dictate every subsequent decision that you make. Making these decisions is hard and may take hours or weeks. Don't rush through the decisions just to "get it over with." After you make them, you'll use them as a guide to outlining the story, which is also hard. The thing about planned screenwriting is that the difficult part comes first.

If you find it hard, that doesn't mean you aren't cut out for this. It just means this part is hard.

However, once you've made your spinal decisions and then constructed an effective outline, the scenes will fly out of your fingers. Writing will be shockingly easy. And it will take far less time than you think. So buckle down and do this part right. In my screenwriting class we don't start writing dialogue until maybe halfway through the semester. Why? Because planning—

the spine, the outline—takes time, as does learning *how* to plan. The vast majority of my students, when polled at the end of the semester, state that the actual writing of pages is "easier" or "much easier" than they expected when they began the class. That's because they had carefully constructed a plan. So be serious about this part of the process. The more clearly you can make these decisions at the outset, the stronger and more energetic your story will be.

A HERO WITH A GOAL IS THE KEY

The two biggest decisions in making your material dramatizable are the hero and her goal. Let's start by defining what we mean by "hero" and "goal," because in drama and in this text these words have specific meanings that may differ from what you assume.

The Hero's Pursuit of a Goal Drives the Story

By "hero" we simply mean the character whose pursuit of a goal drives and defines the story.

You may like the terms "protagonist" or "main character," but in this book I use "hero." Rest assured, by hero I do *not* mean the white, Christian, heterosexual male in the white Stetson on the white stallion oppressing colonized persons of color. Your hero may be black or white, good or bad, female or male.

Hero means the character whose fortunes we're watching rise and fall. The hero is the person we follow through the story: the person who does the action or stops a bad action from being done. It may happen to be John Wayne in a white hat or may be serial killer John Wayne Gacy. "Villains" are often the hero, for the purpose of your spine. Richard III is a contemptible heel but is irrefutably the hero of Shakespeare's *Richard III* (Laurence Olivier's movie version, by the way, is great cinema). The hero doesn't have to be "moral."

What's key is that the hero is doing the most interesting, watchable, and crucial things in the situation. Heroes are usually active and usually—but not always—the characters with the most screen time. They are probably the main *force*: the people whose actions and journey we follow. The hero is preferably the

person whose position in the situation is most interesting and certainly the person whose actions make the most difference in the outcome of the situation.

That's why it's really impossible to define "hero" without defining "goal" at the same time.

The hero is the person whose goal is the reason for the story.

Are You *Your Hero?*

Male writers tend to write male heroes. In scripts by women the heroes are usually female. Why? Because we tend to think first of the "me surrogate" as the character through whose eyes the story will be seen. "After all, the story represents my point of view, so I must be the hero."

Ah, but are "point of view" and "hero" the same thing? No. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* the hero is clearly the crusading lawyer Atticus Finch, who wants to win the case. But the point of view—the character we identify with, through whose eyes the story is "seen," what literary critics would call the "central intelligence"—is his daughter Scout. In *The Great Gatsby* Nick Carraway "tells" the story, but the hero is Gatsby: without his goal of winning Daisy there's no plot, and the title would be *That Summer I Hung Out with a Rich Guy*.

In *The Glass Menagerie* we identify with Tom and see more of him than of anybody else, but the *hero* is his mother Amanda, because she's the one fighting for a goal: to get sister Laura a husband. You might say that Tom's goal is "to leave," but he takes virtually no action in that direction until the last five minutes, when he sneaks out, while Amanda spends the whole story desperately struggling to secure a future for Laura. We identify with Tom, but without Amanda there's no story.

So you see, the hero doesn't have to be the person with whom you (or the audience) identify. Very often when I write a story, I want to make the "me" character the hero—the central focus, the person whose actions we follow from beginning to end. After all, I'm mighty important to me. But I'm not doing "me" the writer any favors by picking the wrong hero. Ask yourself, is

the "you" character really the right character to follow? The hero should be the person who is key to the situation, whose journey decides the outcome.

Who's the person fighting the battle?

Who's the person who's doing something cool?

Who saves or loses the day?

Who is the dramatic engine?

Who is the person whose desire and pursuit of a goal are the reasons why something is happening in the first place?

The person whose point of view we share may turn out to be the hero, the person who has the most screen time may be the hero, and the person with whom we identify may be the hero—but sometimes not.

The Hero Wants the Goal Badly and Takes Action

The best kind of hero is one who cares madly and passionately about achieving a goal and is willing to go to great lengths to do so.

Ideally, the hero is also resourceful and chooses interesting tactics (except, of course, in some comedies, where ineptitude might be preferable—the comic hero takes action, expects to succeed, but messes up again and again until being serendipitously successful in the end).

You might say, "Sir, you are cramping my creativity! I want my hero to be passive and inert." OK, but you'll find it easier to bring that character to life in a novel. Such a character doesn't take action in the external world, and action in the external world is what dramatic narrative is all about. (In any case, even if you do create such a character, at least give your hero a specific goal *not* to pursue; a script can sometimes be about evading a goal, though it's very difficult to pull off.)

In general a character with a strong desire who acts on that desire makes a good hero. A character who wants nothing is a poor choice because people who want nothing *do* nothing. If your hero does nothing, what do you write about? A screenplay is a progression of things that a hero does to achieve some goal.

A passive character, who perhaps does want something but does nothing to get it or can't decide on a course of action, is difficult to write. Even the supposedly ambivalent and dithering Hamlet does a great number of things, including killing at least two guys and putting on a wonderful play, in pursuit of his very active and specific goal of getting revenge on his stepfather.

Passive heroes who don't take action to pursue their desires and goals can be written, but it's tricky. In *Wonder Boys* the novelist played by Michael Douglas pursues the goal of *not* dealing with the fact that his married mistress is pregnant with his child. Throughout the course of the movie he has all manner of drunken adventures to distract himself, but in the end he must deal with his problem. By marrying his mistress he fails to achieve his goal of avoiding the problem.

Writing is a lot less tricky with a hero who wants something and goes for it.

Picking the Wrong Hero

When I was a student at UCLA film school I wrote a thriller about identical twins, based on a true case in France where one twin was jealous of the other, tied him up, and hijacked his life—slept with his wife, took over his job, and disciplined his children.

Obviously, thought I, the "bad twin" was the villain and the "good twin," whose life was stolen, was the hero. And since the good twin was the "hero" and main character, the story should be told from his point of view.

There was only one problem: the good twin spent the whole movie tied up in a basement! How do you write that? Voice-over? "Lord, does my nose itch. I'd like to punch my twin brother in the face. Maybe there's a way I could scratch my nose. My brother really sucks."

Clearly, I had chosen the wrong participant in the situation as the hero. The person taking action, the person pursuing a goal, was the "bad twin" who impersonated his brother. So the story must follow him, thus making him the hero. When I rewrote with my new hero in mind, the plot worked.

The Hero Should Be Understandable

Your hero may be adorable (*The Matchmaker*), despicable (*Richard III*), or merely human (Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar Named Desire*), but we must understand the character if we are to be interested. It is hard to stay interested in a hero whose actions are incomprehensible (which is why insane people are hard to write as heroes). People whose actions seem comprehensible are more engaging. In some notable films the opposite is true (*Breathless* and *Schindler's List*), but the works of Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Jean Renoir, and Max Ophuls are almost invariably portraits of heroes made understandable to the audience. The Aileen Wournos biography *Monster* is interesting precisely because it makes the serial killer hero's motives comprehensible to us. That is the essence of humanistic art but also a key to holding audience interest.

The Advantage of the Monohero

For the beginning writer, it's a good idea to limit your focus to a single hero (or two characters who are engaged throughout the narrative). Single heroes have an inherent advantage: they create unity. Unity is good because a unified script holds our attention more firmly. A script that knows what it's about and concentrates on fewer things has more time to accumulate interest around those few things. The more time we spend with a person, the more interested we are in that person and the more we care. In general the single hero creates more unity and accrues more audience interest.

Most artistically (and commercially) successful movies have a single hero, but keep in mind the many also quite unified movies with two equally interesting characters battling, either of which could be picked as the hero. Is the hero of the romantic comedy *Adam's Rib* Katharine Hepburn or Spencer Tracy? It doesn't really matter, since each has the goal of winning the court case.

Sometimes two characters compose a team. In *Seven* Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt share the goal of stopping the villain, so it's not important which you choose as hero. That's fine, as long

as we're doing the job of defining and limiting the shape and scope of the story in advance.

The Basics of the Hero

By now you understand that the hero is the dramatic engine of the story, whose actions are decisive in the outcome of the situation. The hero's desire drives the story, but desire is not enough; that desire must coalesce around a specific goal. Heroes with strong desire and the resourcefulness to go after what they want can be written more easily than weak, confused characters with no idea of what they want. The hero's not always the "you" character or the person we identify with or the person whose point of view we share or the most "moral" person and not even always the character with the most screen time (though in those cases it might make sense to rethink your structure). The hero is the character whose pursuit of an objective drives the story forward and creates action. The hero is the one who wants something and takes action to get it. She's the character with a goal and the one who wins or loses in the end. The hero solves her own problem in act III.

THE GOAL

Writing can be hard. There's a blank page. You must fill it. With what? Your first instinct may be to say, "People doing and saying amusing things, dangerous things, or touching things." People talking and performing physical actions. So why do people do things and say things? Because they want something. If there's nothing I want, no problems that need solving and no prizes beckoning, I sprawl on the couch—and so do fictional characters.

To illustrate this point, I sometimes say in class, "Here am I *not* wanting anything."

And I sit in a chair.

In silence.

For fifteen seconds.

Believe me, fifteen seconds of dead air in class feels like forever. Sometimes I make a funny face after ten seconds, which

gets a surprisingly good laugh, because that much silence in a theatricalized setting like a classroom is just too much tension to bear and therefore a great setup for a gag.

Then I say, "Here's me wanting to answer the door." I get up, answer the door, and act like someone behind the door shoots me. Then I point out that if you give the character a goal that requires action, that action propels the story and gives you something to write. The simple truth is that you need your hero to want something because that's what propels the character into action.

The same is true of every character in the piece. In dramatic writing the most important thing to know about characters is what they want: Richard III wants the crown, Hamlet wants revenge, and the guys in *Waiting for Godot* want to meet Godot. The lawyer wants to win the case, the detective wants to arrest the murderer, and the boy wants to marry the girl.

We all desire things—then do absolutely nothing to get them. There's a distinction between desiring and doing. Here's another little classroom performance. I say, "Here am I desiring that Josh, that kid in the front row, be punished."

Once again I do the sitting in silence for fifteen seconds.

Then I say, "Here am I pursuing my goal of punishing Josh," and I throw an eraser at Josh. It's messy and the room loves it—especially Josh, because, of course, you pick the class clown for this gag and set it up with him in advance. Thus the class grasps why pursuing goals is so important for dramatic characters. Having a goal stirs things up. It gives you something to write. It makes writing easy.

Furthermore, the students understand that "desire" is one thing but forming a goal and pursuing it is another. It's not enough to *want* something—you have to *do* something. Take action. That action might be shooting a gun, giving a speech, or stroking a comely knee. Raising an eyebrow is action so long as it is designed to achieve a goal, but it must have a goal or it isn't *dramatic* action.

Only when you have a goal can you formulate things to do in pursuit of that goal. The goal comes first in the series of decisions

that you make in constructing a dramatic narrative. The things that the character does in pursuit of the goal will change and develop the situation and will create problems. Now the character has to deal with those new problems, and before you know it you've got plot.

Goals Are Specific and Concrete

Of course, we all have vague things that we want or desire. We want to be happy, we want to be loved, and we want to be rich. However, those aren't specific enough to shape a story. Everybody wants to be happy, to be rich, and to be loved. These general desires are not up to the job of dramatic goal. As a writer, what good does it do you to decide, "My hero's goal is to be happy"? How does that give you something to write? Now what?

You have to make a more specific decision. It's one thing to have a vague desire; it's another to have a dramatic goal. A goal is specific. It's a particular, concrete thing that we can *see happen* on screen: crossing a finish line, accepting a marriage proposal, killing the man who assassinated your father. A goal is something we can watch the character pursue and see him achieve.

A character who wants to "find love" might have the goal of getting one particular girl to marry him. That's more specific. We all want to make money or be rich. You have to be more specific. You might say, "She wants to make money so her son doesn't have to live in poverty." That sounds specific, yet it's not specific in the right sense, which is to say that it doesn't tell us what she *does* to make the money. The way most of us make money is we go to our McJobs and perform dreary, demeaning, repetitive labor. In his essay "In Praise of Idleness," Bertrand Russell said, "Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relative to other matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first is unpleasant and ill-paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid." Both are dull to watch.

Therefore your character who desires money must become a character who does something interesting to get money. Rob a bank. Enter a dance contest. Con a rich guy out of his fortune. Wrestle with the bureaucracy that stands between you and the

dole. And one of those becomes the goal. The underlying desire for money is simply the reason to form the goal.

Clear Goals Make Writing Easy

The accomplished character actor William H. Macy once said (in a *Backstage* interview by Jamie Painter), "Inevitably, the best acting I have ever done has always felt too simple, and I mistrusted it. I thought, It can't be that easy. All I'm trying to do is get her to loan me 20 bucks. All I'm trying to do is talk him into blah, blah, blah. It can't be that; it must be more. They're paying me a fortune. This is a big shot. It's got to be more than that. And it's not." He knew specifically what concrete thing his character wanted and thus could make specific acting choices. Clear, concrete objectives are the most "actable" and the most "writable."

In the end, if your characters don't have goals, you'll run out of ideas for amusing things for the characters to say and do. But once you know where your story is going it's really pretty easy to make decisions about how it gets there. Necessity is the mother of invention, and the necessity of your hero doing things to achieve the goal prompts you to invent the things the character does. But it's easy to invent when you're clear on what your hero wants—hence, no writer's block.

Examples of Specificity and Concreteness

Here are some examples of how goals might be sharpened. Let's start with a few vague, inchoate longings or desires and see how they can be transformed into suitable dramatic goals.

Desire: escape my drab, dull neighborhood and tiresome life. Goal: win the big city dance contest.

Desire: achieve racial justice. Goal: win the big civil rights lawsuit.

Desire: find love. Goal: marry the boy in the next cubicle.

Desire: find myself. Goal: persuade my husband to let me get a job.

Desire: redeem my shameful past as an incompetent cop. Goal: retake the ocean liner from the terrorists.

A specific dramatic goal will carry your hero vigorously

through the story. With a specific rather than abstract goal, heroes clearly know when they have succeeded or failed.

With a specific goal audiences know exactly where they stand at any point in the narrative, so they never ask, "Why are we here?" If you clearly communicate the goal and its importance to the hero very early in the screenplay, it gives audiences the confident, comfortable feeling that the writer is in control of the material and knows what the story is about.

A Proper Goal Is Something We Can *and* Want *to Watch on the Screen*

A goal is something that we *want* to watch being done. I want to watch someone pursue an attractive love object (*Pillow Talk*), win a court case (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), or protect a young woman from a relentless cyborg assassin (*The Terminator*).

I *don't* want to see someone "save up enough money to pay for his kid's operation." How do you "save money"? You *don't* go to the movies, *don't* eat out, and clip coupons—all stuff that you either can't show on screen or don't want to see on screen. So if a guy needs money for his kid's operation, saving isn't the way to do it. Hold the hospital hostage and threaten to harm people unless the operation is performed.

Another example of a poor goal is the hero's desire to get into college. Well, how do you get into college? You study, you pay attention in your high school classes, and you fill out applications. Which of those things do you want to watch in a movie? The exciting sequence where the applicant composes the mandatory essay? If you want to write a movie about getting into college, the hero probably has to achieve it by doing things that we can watch on screen and want to watch on the screen, such as stealing the answers to the entrance exam or cross-dressing to obtain a scholarship fraudulently.

The Goal Must Be Terminal

Just as the goal must be concrete and specific, it must also be terminal: success and failure are clear and the story ends.

That's what goals do: they give a beginning, middle, and end to the story. When the goal is achieved, the story is over. Choose a goal that can be settled in the course of the film. That's what I mean by terminal: a goal that can be settled clearly once and for all. A case is won or lost. The love object says yes or no.

For a Goal to Matter, Something Must Be at Stake

Whatever goal you choose, some outcome must be at stake: what is gained or lost if the hero succeeds or fails?

At most, the whole fate of the world may be at stake. How many science fiction movies have you seen where the fate of Planet Earth hangs in the balance, as in *War of the Worlds*?

Large stakes are the norm in Hollywood films and can be exciting, but stakes that are small and personal are entirely sufficient. The notion that large stakes are always better than small stakes and that the stakes must rise as the film progresses isn't absolutely true. Whether the kid in *A Christmas Story* gets his air rifle isn't of world-shaking importance, but it matters to him more than anything else in the world and we like him, so we care.

The Least That Can Be at Stake Is the Hero's Happiness

It's interesting to note that small stakes seem to work well in stories about children, probably because small matters seem so large to them. A student of mine wanted to write about how she came to America from the Philippines as a little girl and how she had trouble fitting into American culture, especially socially at school. It's a fascinating situation, and she came up with a great goal for the character: to throw a successful birthday party attended by all the popular kids. Because we understood how much the character cared, *we* cared. Along the way we got a fascinating portrait of what it's like to be a young Filipino girl adjusting to American life.

Small goals with low stakes often suffice in comedy, partly because a great passion over a trivial matter is funny. But the hero has to care.

The very least that can be at stake is the hero's happiness. If

achieving the goal doesn't matter to the character, it doesn't matter to us. I don't want to see the movie about the guy who sort of likes the girl; I want to see the movie about the guy who can't live without her.

Compression of Time
A sneaky way of upping the stakes is to compress the "real world" time in which the story unfolds. Events that in real life stretched across years might on film crowd an eventful weekend. The events thereby seem bigger and more dramatic—more remarkable—because they take place in a shorter time frame.

Just Go Ahead and Make Up a Goal
Without a goal nothing pulls us through the world of the film. The goal is what you organize the hero and the plot around. It helps you to simplify and make decisions—to shape your inspiration into something active, dramatic, and driven forward by clear conflict.

The goal is a terribly important decision, but sometimes a situation or a territory doesn't immediately seem to suggest a clear goal. Sometimes you have to just make one up. Sometimes the selection of a goal is rather arbitrary.

Remember Veronica? The hero of her script was a little girl in a family of migrant farm workers. Veronica simply wanted to write about this period of her life, but the story needed shape. The hero needed a goal. Veronica chose the goal of buying her mother a good television set so that she could see her *telenovelas* without static. The results were delightful. I still recall the scene of the little girl standing with the rabbit ears held aloft just so, because that was the only way the mother could get a decent picture. Any number of goals might have served Veronica's purpose of giving shape to an examination of the world of her childhood. Her goal could have been to persuade her parents to spend Christmas in Guadalajara with Grandma or to win a spelling bee. Any of those goals would have been a perfectly fine route through the territory, as long as we see that it matters to the little girl.

Must the Hero Actually Achieve the Goal?

By the way, heroes needn't get what they go after. In *Casablanca* Rick wants to marry Ilsa, but in the end he sends her away because he has a higher calling: battling fascism. In *Chinatown* Jake's goal is to save Evelyn Mulwray, but in the end he inadvertently is involved in her death. What's important is not that the hero wins but rather that we know when the game (the movie) is over. The goal is something that we use to draw a frame around a story. It's what the audience is waiting to find out. The hero may win, may lose, or may have victory within reach and then at the last minute choose something else, as in *Casablanca*—it doesn't matter, as long as that goal has pulled us through the story and defined the story. That's the goal's job.

The story is over when we know at last whether or not the hero achieves the goal.

CENTRAL CONFLICT

Once you have a hero with a goal, you're a long, long way down the road. Further than you think. If it's really a playable goal, you've made the hardest, most important artistic decisions in the whole process. Stop and congratulate yourself. If not, that's OK: keep pondering and don't quit until you have what you need.

To bring the goal to life you need *opposition*. Drama is conflict and (insofar as possible) every scene in the script should be a scene of conflict. Conflicts will occur all through the script. The hero will conflict, in one way or another, with everybody.

However, the hero will generally have one main entity—usually one *person*—with whom to conflict. When we know this person's name, we know the central conflict. The central conflict is always BLANK VS. BLANK, with the first blank being the hero's name and the second being the person with whom the hero has the most conflict.

The Central Conflict Isn't Always with the So-Called Villain

Very often the central conflict is with the character that's obviously the villain. But not always. Look at *Seven*. Yes, Morgan

Freeman and Brad Pitt want to catch the bad guy, but their main source of conflict throughout the picture is each other. They conflict over *how* they're going to catch the villain. In *Erin Brockovich* Julia Roberts fights the evil power company, but her central conflict is with her ally, her boss Albert Finney. Sometimes I think that the central conflict should be called the "central relationship." Think about your own life—is most of your conflict with your enemy or with your allies? Your spouse, a parent, your kids, and your business partner: these are the people with whom you have your conflicts because they are the ones with whom you spend the most time and perhaps the relationships where the stakes are highest. In romantic comedies (and sometimes in romantic dramas) the conflict is most often between the lovers. In *Casablanca* the conflict is Humphrey Bogart versus Ingrid Bergman, in *The Lady Eve* it's Barbara Stanwyck versus Henry Fonda, and in *Adam's Rib* it's Tracy versus Hepburn.

Be as specific as possible in selecting a central conflict—usually it's the hero versus one other person, who is almost always the character with whom the hero spends the most screen time. Being vague isn't helpful. "Hero versus everybody who doesn't want her to get married" is a bad central conflict. "Hero versus her mother" is a good one. Part of the purpose of the spine is to force you to make decisions that will make your screenplay sharply focused rather than diffuse. Picking one person who opposes your hero most frequently and importantly will sharpen the focus of your story.

Don't Confuse Dramatic Conflict with Thematic Conflict

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* the main dramatic conflict is Civilized Refinement versus Animal Brutality, right? Wrong. The *dramatic* conflict is between Blanche and Stanley. They may represent Refinement and Brutality, but I cannot watch a battle between these qualities. I can, however, watch a battle between a man and a woman. When filling out your spine, be sure not to write down a *thematic* conflict in the space for dramatic conflict. If you were doing a spine for *Streetcar*, "Blanche vs. Stanley" would be the right answer.

THE HOOK

Now that we've looked at the hero, goal, and central conflict, let's address the spinal element that we call the hook.

The hook is what's fun, intriguing, or juicy about the story. It's what the audience came to see. The hook is a way of boiling down the story into the elements that will attract, titillate, or pique the interest of moviegoers—the things that fill seats. It's the most gimmicky part of the spine and the least important artistically.

The hook is not a plot summary. Sometimes the plot premise is the hook, but more generally the hook is the story element or elements that make it intriguing. Why is the audience curious about your film? That's the hook.

Size, Novelty, Exoticism, Genre, and Market

In general a good hook involves novelty—something that the audience hasn't seen—or size—something big or important. Sometimes the novelty is literally the physical size of the image, as in the case of technologies such as IMAX and Cinerama. Sometimes it's the size of the production, as with *Titanic*: the biggest shipwreck of the biggest ship carrying the biggest people with the biggest jewels, all done with the biggest special effects.

An example of the novelty hook might be "the dinosaurs come back to the modern world and eat people" or "a little boy finds a space alien and keeps him as a pet." Novelty can also mean "exoticism," a word that postmodernists don't much care for because one person's exotic locale is someone else's backyard, but I'll use it for want of something better. When you view movie trailers from the thirties, it's striking how often they describe the stories and the characters as "strange" and use the phrase "you've never seen!" In 1998 lesbians seemed exotic to the average suburbanite and so did the New York art world. "A bisexual love triangle set in the world of high art with two girls kissing" turned out to be an effective hook for the superb indie feature *High Art*. *The Man with the Golden Arm*, starring Frank Sinatra, made a splash in 1955 by depicting the world of a junkie. A closed milieu that most of us have never peeked into is hooky.

The "cardigan test" of a hook is what would you say about the movie to your mate if you wanted to sell the outing: "Honey, let's go see that movie about the guy who was kidnapped and sold into slavery."

"Oh! Wait! Just let me just get my cardigan."

Who's the Audience for the Hook?

Part of the hook is understanding the environment in which films are made. The hook is usually aimed at the audience, but which audience? Is the script for the art film crowd? For families? The hook is partly about shaping your concept for particular buyers, such as the cable market, and the more you know about the marketplace the better.

The hook very often is about similarity to something that's already been successful, especially for producers and studio executives. They want something familiar—but with a twist. "*Die Hard* on an ocean liner." "*Sister Act* meets *Lord of the Rings*." Producers understand the some movie meets some other movie hook.

Two big reasons why people go to movies are the star and the director. A star can "open a movie," which is to say draw big audiences on the first weekend of release. However, in constructing your spine, it doesn't help you to say that the star or director is the hook because you don't have a star or director attached.

Maybe your hook is that the lead role is a great "star part." This unfortunately means a part that fits one of the people who are already stars. If your hero is a chubby 15-year-old Asian boy, there is no star in the Hollywood firmament who fits that description, so it's not a star part. If your hero is a tough, male action hero of indeterminate age, well, that describes maybe eight out of the top ten bankable stars. This is not to say you shouldn't write about chubby 15-year-old Asian boys (or 60-year-old women or any of the other groups that Hollywood shamefully ignores); just be aware that those stories might be better aimed at cable (the 15-year-old boy as hero might appeal to the Disney Channel, for example) or at producers of independent cinema.

Great characters attract actors. Still, you can't count on get-

ting a particular actor, which is why many writers describe the hero in a way that isn't specific about age or ethnicity (if Will Smith turns down the part the producer can still send the script to Ashton Kutcher).

Genre as Hook

That "something" that pulls in the audience may indeed be the film's genre. Action-adventure sells. Romantic comedy sells. The hook for your screenplay may include a mention of genre if your story happens to fall into a particular genre. "A romantic comedy about a young man who falls for his mother-in-law." "An action movie about prisoners who take over a prison transport plane."

When writing your first screenplay, though, just remember not to let the demands of genre twist your vision. Genre too easily becomes a confusing quagmire for the beginning writer. Set out to tell a particular story with particular characters—if it fits into an established genre, fine.

The Hook Is the Least Important Part of the Spine for a Beginner

In writing your first screenplay, please don't worry overly much about the hook. It's much more important to find an idea that you can dramatize and that will let you shine as a writer. The hookiest hook in the world is nothing but a horrible trap if it tempts you into writing a script that is outside your range.

All in all, when writing the first screenplay, the hook is the least important part of the spine. Too often beginning writers are overly concerned with the concept or can't-miss gimmick, which leads to a slighting of plot, character, and story logic—the things that you must be most concerned about learning. Remember, everybody has a great "concept" for a script, but remarkably few people finish one. Concentrate for now on learning your craft, and don't let hook become too important while writing your first script. It's much more important to come up with a dramatizable idea that's right for *you*.

The hook is a little more vague and evanescent than the hero

or goal, both of which ought to be definite and unarguable once you've decided on them. The hook is tricky, arguable, and often a matter of taste. One person's hook is another's yawn.

Here are some good hooks:

Oedipus Rex: "A man kills his father and marries his mother" (novelty).

Independence Day: "Aliens want to destroy planet earth" (size).

Chicago: "A big budget musical at a time when they aren't being done anymore" (novelty).

Spellbound (1945): "A psychiatrist goes crazy" (novelty).

Spellbound (2003): "The biggest spelling bee in America" (size).

Boogie Nights: "Adventures in XXX cinema of a guy with a huge endowment" (size and novelty).

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

We've discussed every spinal question save the trickiest of all. The central question is the issue *other than the goal* that the audience is wondering about throughout the film. This issue is up in the air alongside the question of whether or not the hero will achieve the goal.

One way to discover the central question is to close your eyes and imagine that you're watching the story. Talk the story aloud to yourself. Then ask yourself, "What am I wondering while I watch this?"

Another way to ferret out the central question is to ask yourself, "What question apart from whether the hero achieves the goal is answered at the end of the film?"

The Central Question Is Never Merely a Rewording of the Goal

If the central question is a restatement of the goal, what is the point of having a central question? It's redundant. In other words, if your goal is to escape Alcatraz Island, the central question shouldn't be "Will he escape Alcatraz Island?" or "How will he escape Alcatraz Island?" Those questions are already implicit in the goal. To ask them does not add to the writer's understanding of what the script will be about.

The Central Question Can Be a Subplot

In *His Girl Friday* the romantic issue is the goal: tabloid newspaperman Cary Grant wants to win back his reporter ex-wife, Rosalind Russell. He does it by tantalizing her with the juicy, page-one scandal of a man wrongly condemned to death. The goal is to get back his ex-wife; the central question is "Will they save the wrongly condemned man?" The story isn't over until both issues are settled.

In *Rear Window* the goal is to catch the killer, and the central question is "Will Grace Kelly get Jimmy Stewart to commit?" The adventure is the goal; the romantic subplot supplies the central question.

Demon from the Past, Character Flaw, Need versus Want

Especially in action movies, a common central question is whether the hero will overcome some demon from the past. For example, the policeman did something shameful a long time ago and now has a chance to redeem himself by stopping the villains. Some screenwriting teachers call this the "ghost."

In *Casablanca* Rick's goal is to get Ilsa back, but his demon is the cynicism that enveloped him after she ditched him in Paris. At the end of the picture he overcomes that cynicism and redeems himself by joining the fight against fascism.

Some screenwriting educators like to make a distinction between what heroes want (their goal) and what they need (the central question). Maybe the hero needs to learn something. Or prove something. Or feel something. Or fix something about herself. What they call "need" might be what I am calling the central question. Very often the spiritual or psychological aspect of the hero's quest is the central question.

EXAMPLES OF SPINES

We have now examined all the various spinal elements separately, so let's look at how they work together to define the essence of a screenplay. Here are some spines from beloved classics. As an exercise, you might want to list your five favorite films and see if you can uncover the spines.

Casablanca

Hook: Love, guns, Nazis, and intrigue at an exotic port of call.

Hero: Rick.

Goal: Win back Ilsa.

Central question: Will he realize that his cynicism and isolationism are wrong?

Central conflict: Rick versus Ilsa.

Comment: As in so many pictures a lot is going on, including adventure and intrigue, but it all boils down in the end to that classic goal: get the girl. In this case the central question reflects a demon from Rick's past—his anger over having lost the love of Ilsa and his resulting cynicism. Ilsa's goal of getting the letters of transit is also an important narrative motor.

The Birds

Hook: Horror when the birds gang up on the humans.

Hero: Melanie.

Goal: Escape from the birds.

Central question: Will Melanie end up with Mitch (the handsome bachelor who's protecting her from the birds)?

Central conflict: Melanie versus the birds.

Comment: This spine could also be done from the point of view of Mitch. The goal is to save his family from the birds. The central question is "Will he win Melanie?" and the central conflict is Mitch versus Melanie. Thematically, Melanie's ordeal with the birds is perhaps a supernatural penance for her meaningless life, so another possible central question is "*Why* are the birds attacking?"

The Bicycle Thieves

Hook: The terrible problems of destitute peasants in postwar Rome.

Hero: The owner of the bicycle.

Goal: Find the stolen bike.

Central question: What will the family do if the man loses his job?
Central conflict: The bicycle owner versus his son.
Comment: Just as the central conflict in *Seven* is between Freeman and Pitt, two men chasing the same villain, here the conflict is between the owner of the bike and his son, who accompanies him on his journey. Note that the central conflict is *not* "owner versus thieves." He never meets them.

Citizen Kane
Hook: The inside scoop on America's most powerful and mysterious tycoon.
Hero: The reporter.
Goal: To find out what "Rosebud" means.
Central question: What makes Kane tick?
Central conflict: Reporter versus sources.
Comment: *Citizen Kane* has a complex and unique structure and doesn't yield to spinal examination as readily as some films. Still, in terms of a goal that unifies and defines the film, it's most certainly the reporter's quest. The story truly begins when he gets his assignment and ends when he gives up on it. We barely glimpse the reporter, which demonstrates that the character with the most screen time isn't always the hero from the point of view of the mechanism of the drama. It is also possible to create a spine with Kane as the hero, with his goal being "to find love," but that would be a much more episodic and less compelling story than that of the reporter.

Wild Strawberries
Hook: The troubled inner life of a highly respected and seemingly successful man (which, come to think of it, sounds a bit like the hook for *Citizen Kane*).
Hero: Isak.
Goal: Make it to Lund in time to pick up his award.

Central question: Will Isak realize that he's an unloving human being?
Central conflict: Isak versus his daughter-in-law.
Comment: Even a subtle, delicate art film such as Ingmar Bergman's classic *Wild Strawberries* has a spine. Using dream sequences and voice-over narration, *Wild Strawberries* is more "internal" than most films. Isak's real journey is an inner one, toward self-knowledge, but "Isak versus Isak" is not an option for central conflict in a movie, even an "artistic" movie. Instead, Bergman cannily provides the critical, outspoken daughter-in-law to challenge Isak, thus externalizing Isak's internal conflict.

Goldfinger
Hook: International spies, bikinied lovelies, and spectacular action.
Hero: "Bond. James Bond."
Goal: Stop Goldfinger.
Central question: Will Bond be killed?
Central conflict: Bond versus Goldfinger.
Comment: This movie is very straightforwardly structured, as action movies tend to be. If the central question is whether Bond lives then he obviously has to be put in mortal danger at regular intervals. He is.

The Gold Rush
Hook: The colorful days of gold mining.
Hero: The Little Tramp.
Goal: Find gold.
Central question: Will he also get the girl?
Central conflict: The Little Tramp versus Partner Big Jim.
Comment: Though the script's hook is indeed gold mining, at the height of his fame Chaplin could have made a hit out of any subject.

All about Eve

Hook: The backstage scoop on a vicious show business rivalry.

Hero: Eve.

Goal: Steal Margo's life.

Central question: Does Eve's gall have limits?

Central conflict: Eve versus Margo.

Comment: This film is an example of the dramatic hero and the main character (the character with the most screen time, played by Bette Davis) being different characters. We see a bit more of the Bette Davis character, but her nemesis Eve is the dramatic engine of the piece. Still, the spine could involve Margo as hero, changing the goal to "keep Eve from stealing my life." It's one of those stories that could be spined from either side of the central conflict.

Clerks

Hook: Everyday life as it's really lived; McJobs; the novel spectacle of young people talking the way young people really talk.

Hero: The convenience store clerk.

Goal: Decide whether he's going to break up with his girlfriend.

Central question: Will he get fired?

Central conflict: Convenience store clerk versus video store guy.

Comment: Ironically, the very lack of bigness or exoticism becomes the hook. Being real and sincere sets the movie apart and makes it different—thus hooky.

A Christmas Story

Hook: Christmas, kids, nostalgia, and family.

Hero: Ralphie.

Goal: Persuade his mom to get him the air rifle.

Central question (a subplot): Will Mom manage to get rid of Dad's "leg lamp"?

Central conflict: Ralphie versus Mom.

Comment: I take a poll every year. Many university students consider this the "best Christmas movie ever made." It's an excellent model for screenwriters who want to shape scattered real-life experiences into a cohesive script while still respecting the integrity of the material. Here's a film that's really quite episodic, with numerous subplots, yet the desperate yearning for the air rifle pulls it along and gives it just enough unity. The author nostalgically reminisces about his boyhood Christmases in Hammond, Indiana. The key is giving the hero a goal that will hold it all together—such as a Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot Range Model air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time.

A SPINE FOR AN ENSEMBLE FILM

In some stories we follow a group of characters, all of whom are equally important and each of whom has an individual goal (though they all may share a group goal as well).

Robert Altman (*Nashville*, *A Wedding*, and *Gosford Park*) is past master of the form; Alan Rudolph (*Welcome to LA*) and Paul Thomas Anderson (*Magnolia*) are notable practitioners. Other examples are *The Big Chill*, *The Anniversary Party*, *Animal House*, and *A Bridge Too Far*.

Some ensemble films keep the characters together for most of the film (*The Breakfast Club*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and *Stagecoach*), while others follow separate characters at different locations with stories that usually intertwine along the way and converge in the end (*Nashville*, *Magnolia*). If you are writing an ensemble film, simply create a spine for *every* important character and then come up with another spine for the group as a whole. There's only one hook because there's only one movie.

In other words, in *Stagecoach* the *group* goal is to survive the dangerous trip to Lordsburg. The *individual* goals vary. The Ringo Kid wants revenge. Dallas, the prostitute, wants Ringo. The marshal wants to take Ringo to jail. The banker wants to get away

with embezzling the bank's funds. The gambler wants to protect Lucy. Doc Boone wants a drink. But they all want to survive the journey through Indian country and reach Lordsburg.

All Characters Have Goals

Creating a spine for every major character, essential in the ensemble film, isn't a bad idea for all screenplays.

Once you have constructed your spine, it is sometimes helpful to make a list of the characters in your story and identify their goals. Then ask yourself, "How do these goals relate to the hero's goals?" Are these people helping or hindering or a bit of both, depending on what's going on at the moment? If they're against the hero, are they pretending to be allies? If they're for the hero, is that apparent from the start or are they mistaken for enemies?

WHAT THE PICTURE'S ABOUT

Remember, determining the spine means deciding what your picture is going to be about so you can make it be about that. If you decide at the outset that the film is about a certain character with a particular goal and that the hook is such-and-such and then wander away from that hero, goal, and hook in actually writing the scenes, you've wasted your time in bothering to write a spine at all. If you find in outlining and writing your scenes that you just can't stick to your spine, go back and rework your spine.

How Do You Know That the Spine Is Right?

As the great Moss Hart said in his famous memoir *Act One*, "When an idea is sound it writes easily."

You know that you have the right spine when you can say, "This will be easy to write."

Not "I think I can do this" or "Maybe I can write this" but "This will be easy." Keep working on your spine until you can look at it and say, "This will be easy."

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

You're thinking, "Easy can't be good. Only suffering and straining make for great art." No, you poor baby, no! Eugene O'Neill

started *Long Day's Journey into Night* because he knew that he was dying and it would write quickly and easily. When it was done, he saw that it was the best thing he'd ever written. The easy idea is the sound one, thought through with the help of two tools: the spine and step outline. More on the step outline later.

THE SPINE AT A GLANCE

You now understand the spine and are ready to construct one. Take this last look at what a spine should be and then try writing your own, or several of your own, secure in the knowledge that you can invent a new one if you later find that your spine "won't write."

HERO: The main character, whose desire is the engine of the piece. The person whose pursuit of a goal drives the plot and defines its borders. The person who wants something and is willing to go after it. Have you chosen the right person in the situation as the hero? Is this the person whose pursuit of a goal defines the story?

GOAL: Something the hero wants. It has to be concrete. We must *want* to watch the hero do what has to be done to pursue it. It has to be something that we *can* watch done on the screen. A good goal is a terminus for the story. It's terminal. It's specific so that the character can take specific, concrete actions in pursuit of it, so the audience has a sense that the story is going somewhere and knows when it reaches a definite end. And there have to be stakes.

CENTRAL QUESTION: The thing we wonder about as we watch the hero pursue the goal. What is the audience waiting to find out—*apart* from the goal? The central question is never a mere restatement of the goal—it's something else that adds another layer of interest. Sometimes it's some side issue that's important, very often the outcome of the love subplot. Is it a lesson the hero needs to learn about life? Or some ongoing problem, such as mortal danger?

CENTRAL CONFLICT: Hero versus the main obstacle, perhaps the primary villain, probably the person or thing with whom the

hero has the most conflict, and often the hero's partner or love object. It's the central relationship.

HOOK: Why does the audience come? What's new or big about the story? Does anything about this story grab our interest in advance? Why are we interested?

Remember, the spine is the hardest part. Don't settle until you have a spine that you think will be easy to write. Learning a bit more about plotting might help with that.

PLOT

The term "plot" refers to the events in a work of fiction, the sequence in which they occur, and how they are interrelated (often through cause and effect). The terms "plot," "story," and "structure" refer to the same thing.

One way to think of plot is as the sequential revelation of information. As we watch events unfold and observe a variety of dramatic incidents, we learn things about the characters and the story moves forward. We want to order those events and keep them in proportion to one another. We want it all to be under control. We want it to be full of conflict. Plot is a series of conflicts that reveal information and move an ever-changing situation forward.

Why bother with plot? Isn't it really much more sophisticated to skip it? Maybe, but plot does two things very well: hold the interest of the audience and provide a model of life.

HOLDING AUDIENCE INTEREST

Legendary mogul and vulgarian Harry Cohn is quoted (in *Movie Anecdotes* by Peter Hay) as remarking, "If a picture stinks, my ass wiggles all over the place." Holding audience interest is the toughest challenge in dramaturgy, and it is primarily plot that does that job. Plot, the shaping of the piece as it moves through time, is there to keep your audience watching, waiting, and wanting to find out what happens next. The writer wants to intrigue the audience, engross it, weave a spell. If the purpose of hooky concepts is to "get butts in the seats," the purpose of plot is to keep them there. A plot that's holding the audience's interest is

a plot that's working, whether it sticks to the rules or not. However, most plots that work exemplify certain simple principles. An understanding of these principles gives you the power to hold the attention of an audience.

At the splendidly diverse university at which I teach, many of my students belong to subcultures that are powerless or rendered invisible by the established media. I love knowing that by teaching them how to construct a plot that commands attention I'm empowering them to tell their stories and the stories of their "tribes." One student in my class wrote a script that was made into a feature film that was named one of the top ten Asian American films of 2009.

The world is helpless in the face of a well-told story. It can't stop listening.

PLOT TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT LIFE

Plotting is not only seductive. It's instructive.

In life, events have causes and effects. Particular actions lead to particular outcomes. Life is a chain of causality, and the act of plotting forces us to examine how one thing leads to another—how life's characters and events connect and form a whole. The decisions that you make about the chain of events in your script compose your "model" of how life works or of how you wish it worked. You as writer show us the structure of events. You show us how life turns out. You do this very specifically by depicting specific lives, yet from the experiences of your characters the audience will draw general conclusions about the nature of life.

Plot inherently makes some kind of statement about life or in some way demonstrates how the writer thinks life goes. It shows us what kinds of actions lead to what kinds of consequences. In *It's a Wonderful Life* George sacrifices his personal dreams for the sake of others and winds up poor but beloved. In *Oedipus* a man kills Pa, marries Ma, and ends up gouging his eyes out. Certain actions lead to certain consequences. Plot condenses and clarifies life and gives us a privileged bird's-eye view of it. Plot is why it is easier to understand and draw lessons from drama than from messy, obscure everyday existence.

PLOT CAN BE CONSPICUOUS IN ITS ABSENCE

Plotting is best achieved by making firm decisions in advance concerning what your story is about, a process that you began with the spine.

What happens to writers who don't decide what the picture is about and don't plot their films carefully? They may start off brilliantly. But after a while it becomes apparent that they're somehow not quite on course, a little off beam, and trying to dazzle the audience with fancy footwork. It gets harder and harder as the story gets further and further off track. Flop sweat breaks out on the script's brow, and the audience squirms. If you've tried and failed to make it up as you go along that should all sound quite familiar to you.

ARISTOTLE'S SIX ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the six elements of tragedy are plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle. These are all still around. Thought, which is to say theme or ideas, is present in even the most pedestrian potboiler, though it may be no more profound than "Crime doesn't pay." "Diction" means language, preferably language that is special or elevated in some way. Virtually all movies contain "nondiagetic" (mood) music, but a few (for example, Robert Wise's *Executive Suite* and the Coen Brothers's *No Country For Old Men*) have no or almost no music. Spectacle is eye candy—something to look at, whether it's a beautiful human being or the U.S. Capitol blown to smithereens; most films contain at the very least a handsomely framed shot or two.

As Aristotle believed, "Of these elements, the most important is plot, the ordering of incidents; for tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness—and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action." Character is crucial, but most filmmakers agree that structure is the key to a watchable movie. Of course, good writers understand that plot and character ultimately become inseparable and evolve together in an organic way. We separate them

in order to be able to think about them, as we pull apart the complex mechanism of a watch only to put it back together into an interconnected whole.

A Single Action, a Progressive Order, Nothing Irrelevant

Aristotle held that the plot must be unified. He wrote in *The Poetics* that a unified plot depicts a "single action," by which he more or less meant the pursuit of a single goal. The example he gives is *The Odyssey*. Odysseus did many interesting things in his life, but they were omitted from *The Odyssey*. Homer instead focuses his epic strictly upon Odysseus's struggle to return to his wife after the Trojan War. That's it. The story begins with Odysseus starting his voyage home. When he gets there and knocks off the guys who are trying to steal his wife, the story is over. A lot of colorful things happen along the way, but they are all obstacles to the accomplishment of a single goal. Unity is about a single action, which is to say a single goal.

Aristotle further theorized that unity exists when "if any [incident] is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted."

In other words, if your story is structured so that no two parts (scenes, sequences, or incidents) may be switched around without causing confusion, then you have achieved unity. If your script gets discombobulated when you take a scene from the first ten minutes and arbitrarily plop it right in the middle, that's a unified script and you're doing something right. Obviously, if you can't switch scenes around without causing confusion, the script must be one where the situation changes and progresses rather than stagnating or moving backward. If the script was static, you could switch scenes around and cause no problem.

Aristotle further observed that the presence of material which does not add to the story creates disunity. "If the presence or absence of something creates no apparent difference, it is no real part of the whole." And should be cut.

Hence if your script is so tight that removing any one scene creates a noticeable gap, that's also a unified script.

A Summary of Aristotle

For Aristotle, unity consists in a script that (1) can be told only in a particular order, (2) contains nothing extraneous, and (3) depicts a "single action," which usually means progress toward a single goal.

The story unfolds in an orderly, progressive fashion that lacks no incident necessary to logical progression and omits everything that's unnecessary. It sticks to what's important, excludes what isn't, and moves steadily forward. By definition, then, a script that is episodic (made up of discrete or freestanding episodes) or digressive or stationary does not meet his test. A unified plot is always moving forward, all the scenes matter, and the order of scenes is the only one possible.

Movies move. Think of the essential nature of the medium—a strip of celluloid running past a searing light. If it stops for a moment, what happens? It melts and snaps. Films such as *Speed* and *Runaway Train* or the mountain road chase scene in *North by Northwest* and the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*, with their speeding vehicles that can't be stopped, are marvelous examples of cinema's essential constant movement.

STICKING TO YOUR SPINE BRINGS UNITY

Constant forward movement need not always be physical. It is the situation—the plot—that must constantly move forward. The hero struggles toward a goal. The characters try to impose their will on other characters and on the world at large. The writer has made decisions in advance (in the spine) as to who interests us and which goals are important. We stick to those characters and those goals.

A plot that sticks to its spine and avoids irrelevancies has unity. If a scene contains the hero trying to accomplish some step along the way to attaining the goal and battling the central conflict, playing the hook and insinuating the central question, then you're on spine, creating unity and holding the audience's attention. It's all a matter of deciding what the script is going to be about and making it be about that—not wandering off into

whims and irrelevancies. Hitchcock and Ford, perhaps the two greatest directors in the history of the medium, "cut in their heads": they shot their films so that they could be put together only one way. That's unity. (And that's how you protect yourself from those who would re-edit your work into something you didn't intend. Don't give them anything extra, said Ford—they'll use it against you.)

Let's return to the spine and explore the specific ways in which it expands into a plot.

Goal, Central Question, and Central Conflict

In plotting the most important thing you need to know is where you're going. Fortunately, right there in the spine are the three destinations that must ultimately be reached: (1) the hero's success or failure in achieving the goal, (2) answering the central question, and (3) the outcome of the central conflict. The goal, central question, and central conflict all need to be posited in the beginning and adhered to throughout the film. Very often a single climactic battle at the end of the film—frequently between the hero and the entity involved in the central conflict—resolves the problem of achieving the goal and answers the central question. At that point the film is over. Ending the film when the goal is won or lost and the central question has been answered is part of sticking to your spine and therefore part of creating a unified work of art.

We create a spine to draw a line around the narrative: "Here are its boundaries, here's what it's about, here are the issues." When those issues are settled, our interest ends—therefore the movie ends. The next time you're at the movies, note how people start packing to leave at the moment when the hero definitely achieves or fails to achieve the goal.

In understanding dramatic structure, you need to grasp two concepts: linearity and three-act structure. Once you understand these, you will be a long way down the road to possessing the power to hold an audience's interest. Either linearity or a three-act structure can sometimes be sufficient to hold an audience, but employing both is the most effective strategy.

LINEARITY

An excellent way to hold an audience's interest is to construct your story so that each scene flows directly out of the previous scene. This approach creates an unbroken chain of interest: a chain of events. If I'm watching, I start to develop interest in scene A. When scene B grows directly out of scene A rather than jumping to something completely different, my interest is maintained and ideally increased. When scene B leads into scene C, my interest is sustained again and probably escalates. The longer I watch, the more involved I become. That is why people who watch serial dramas (*The Guiding Light*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*) eventually become so passionate about them; they have accumulated interest as they've moved along the connected chain of events, sometimes for years.

If you lead the viewer through the story by making sure that each scene is a direct result of the previous scene, you have a good shot at holding and building attention. It's hard to do this perfectly, of course, because you might, for instance, have to cut away to begin a subplot. We just do our best.

The Chain of Causality

Even stronger is the chain of causality: "A causes B causes C causes D." In this approach the opening scene causes something to happen in the second scene, which causes something to happen in the third scene.

Let's relate this to unity. The test of whether a plot is unified and airtight is to pick a scene and ask, "Would the story make sense without this scene?" If the scene you pick was caused by the previous scene and causes the subsequent scene, it is firmly mortared into place: part of an Aristotelian unified whole. If you took out a scene in a strongly linear script, the viewer would sense a gap—something necessary missing. This is what some call "lurching conflict."

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The term "first act" does not mean here what it means in live theatre—a span of stage time bracketed by the opening and closing of the curtain and followed by an intermission.

When we talk about three-act structure in screenwriting, we really mean stages of the plot, each with a different function. Not all films follow this three-act structure (*Pulp Fiction* and *Citizen Kane* don't), but most great films do. It's a tested method of achieving a story with satisfying proportions that holds the interest of an audience. Three-act structure is a process of managing audience interest. Act I: engage interest. Act II: sustain interest. Act III: satisfy interest.

In the *Random House Guide to Good Writing* (by Mitchell Ivers) George S. Kaufman is quoted as saying of three-act structure that "in the first act you get the hero up a tree, in the second act you throw rocks at him, and in the third act you get the poor son-of-a-bitch back down." That's a very accessible way to put it. In act I you get your hero stuck in a tree—tangled up in a difficult situation that's hard to get out of. In act II you throw rocks: complications, obstacles, enemies, problems, and more problems. In act III you get the hero down from the tree by resolving the situation or solving the problem—the hero wins or loses.

Another way to put it: act I is the setup, act II develops conflict, and act III resolves the conflict (shows us who wins). Or you can simply say "beginning, middle, and end," as Aristotle did, but now you understand that beginning, middle, and end have particular functions.

As Alexandre Dumas *père* advised Alexandre Dumas *fils* (quoted in the letters of Dumas *fils*), "The first act clear, the last act short, and all acts interesting." When you set up the story in the first act, lay it out in a way that people can understand. Your last act, the climax and resolution, should be crisp and decisive. And certainly none of it should bore the audience.

Now that you know what people mean when they say that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, let us examine in greater depth what goes into each.

Act I

The audience walks into the theatre with a fund of patience. "In the first fifteen minutes of a play an audience is the most malleable creature in the world," Moss Hart wrote in *Act One*. "Then a curious thing happens. Somehow at the end of that first fifteen minutes an invisible bell seems to ring in the theater, and if the play has not captured them *en masse*, they become a disparate group of people who are never welded together again."

You need to set up the story and get it rolling before that fund of patience runs out. One of the best ways to do that is to start the screenplay as late in the sequence of events as possible—not so late as to exclude anything that is necessary but not so early as to include anything irrelevant. Aristotle said, "A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else, although something else exists or comes after it." In other words, the story begins with what we need to know to understand what follows and not a moment earlier. The beginning, also known as "point of attack," should be as late in the chain of events as possible. Making the beginning too long is perhaps the most common structural error made by beginners. It's easy to do, especially if you're making it up as you go along, with the attendant pages of exploring, wandering, thrashing, and floundering as you "find your way" or "discover your story" or whatever you're doing. In the end you'll cut most of it. Audiences want the story set up as quickly as possible.

WHAT IS A FIRST ACT AND HOW LONG SHOULD IT BE?

Your first act is your setup. It introduces your characters, usually tells us something of their pasts, and graphs their relationships and attitudes toward one another. Furthermore, the first act shows us what the problem/conflict is going to be and sets it in motion. You need to get a lot of information in front of the viewer: who's related to whom, where they come from, what the rules of the movie's world are, and so on. And the problem is compounded because it has to be done quickly and with reasonable subtlety.

How long should your first act be? A film ideally runs be-

tween 90 and 120 minutes long; the rule of thumb is that a page of script equals a minute of screen time, so your script will be 90 to 120 pages. How much of it should be act I?

These things vary from script to script but the first act generally runs between 17 and 30 pages long. OK, 35 at the most.

The films of Hitchcock, for example, generally have longer setups (see *Psycho*), but he was so deft at maintaining audience interest while he put his ingenious situation in place that it wasn't a problem. As a first-time screenwriter, if you find yourself on page 40 or 45 and the first act isn't over, you've got a problem. Then again, a first act in a first draft of a first-time screenwriter often runs long: you can cut later.

ESTABLISH THE GOAL AND POSE THE CENTRAL QUESTION CLEARLY AND EARLY

The main business of act I is to reveal what the picture is about as quickly as possible. In order to care, to feel suspense, audiences must know what it is they are waiting to know.

"Why am I here?"

"What are we waiting to find out?"

You can achieve this very simply: set up the spinal issues in act I.

In the first act you need to make sure that your audience understands and cares about the hero's goal (will the character achieve it?) and is hooked into the central question. You also need to let it know what is the main conflict that the hero will engage in while pursuing this goal.

Hero, goal, central question, central conflict, and maybe a bit of the hook: when you've got all these ducks in a row, you've accomplished a good deal of the business of act I.

And of course it doesn't hurt to establish in act I that your hero is somehow worthy of the audience's attention, whether witty, resourceful, lovable, fascinatingly evil, or just fully, complicatedly human. Our interest in the hero must be engaged in act I. We must understand how passionately the hero wants the goal—happiness depends on achieving it.

THE END OF ACT I

How do you know when the first act is over? The first act is done when it has completed its business: getting the story set up on its feet so that it can run.

The hero is certain of the goal.

Committed.

The conflict "locks in." The central conflict has not merely been introduced but has reached a point of no return. This is where we pivot from the first act into the second. It's an important and strong moment in the script. For example, your hero makes a vow: he won't rest until he kills the man who killed his daughter. It's the lighting of the fuse, the moment when the conflict declares itself. The conflict is now clear. The goal is now clear. The problem is now clear.

And it's clear that the hero won't turn back—and perhaps can't turn back.

Some describe this as the "call to action." The setup is finished. The conflict has begun. The story is up on its feet and punching.

Act II

The second act of a screenplay, lasting, say, from page 17 or 25 to page 90 if the screenplay is 105 pages long, is the complication, developing conflict or whatever you want to call the meat of the story. It's the part where we throw rocks at the hero and tends to be the hardest part of the script to get right.

"As a rule, the writing of a second act seems to drag on forever," Moss Hart wrote in *Act One*. "It is the danger spot of every play—the soft underbelly of play-writing, as Mr. Churchill might put it—and it is well to be aware of it . . . Shaw is said to have remarked, 'Anyone who cannot write a good first act might just as well give up play-writing entirely.' It is second acts that separate the men from the boys."

The major feature of the second act is length. It's by far the longest part of the script. And you have to fill it with incidents, conflicts, complications, scenes. You have to invent, invent, invent. It's one thing to get us into the conflict (act I), another to

get us out of it (act III), but sustaining and developing it require thought and ingenuity.

While the number one problem with a bad first act is that it's too long, the number one problem with a bad second act is that it's too short. When people are writing their first acts, they want to dither around and "explore" instead of doing the important business of getting the story launched. Then comes the second act, and people want to shunt it out of the way in a few scenes. No! The second act is why the people sat through act I. They want to see this conflict that you've set up played out. You got the story on its feet—now run with it. Include plenty of surprises and suspense. Twists, turns, complications—these are what give the otherwise vast, arid landscape of your second act an interesting and exciting topography. As Kaufman would say, "Throw rocks."

MAKE THINGS HARD FOR THE HERO

As writers we often tend to identify with our hero, so we're disinclined to make things hard and messy. Do you want your own personal existence to be studded with hardships or creamy and served on a silver platter? The latter, naturally. Although such a life would turn you into a gelatinous weakling and anyway is probably unavailable to anyone anywhere, it's still what we all think we want.

In dramatic writing, however, the more problems your hero has, the better. Problems are exciting, interesting, and sometimes funny. Problems lead to struggle, resourcefulness, and growth. You have to separate "you" the hero of your screenplay from you the writer. Here's the delicious irony: by making life hard for "you" the dramatic character, you're actually making life easier for you the writer, because problems give you something to write.

THE TWO WAYS YOUR HERO CONFRONTS PROBLEMS

Your hero will deal with the many problems of act II in two ways.

First, she will use her skills and talents. Uma Thurman is a

martial artist in *Kill Bill*, and that's how she deals with problems. Sean Astin as Sam in *Lord of the Rings* has heart and vigilance, which come into play in moments of stress. Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Eve* is a professional cardsharp, so she devises incredible cons to get what she wants. Jimmy Stewart, playing a photographer in *Rear Window*, temporarily blinds the killer by using flashbulbs, thus delaying him until the police arrive. Anne Baxter as Eve in *All About Eve* uses her skill as an actress to manipulate those who stand in her way. The solution to the problem comes out of your hero's identity and "skill set." The hero *knows* things.

Sometimes your hero's inner resources aren't enough. Sometimes heroes need help, but it's a boring cheat if a solution simply drops into their laps—if some benevolent god just takes the problem away. Instead, give your hero an opportunity: an opening, a crack in the door. Then make him use his own initiative to take advantage of that opportunity. Late in *North by Northwest* Cary Grant, hidden outside the villain's mountaintop lodge, has no way of letting Eva Marie Saint know that the villain realizes she's an American spy. He can't talk to her because she's in the same room with the foreign spies. However, Grant has a book of matches bearing his monogram, which Eva Marie Saint knows from having seen it early in the film (gracefully "planted"). So Cary Grant tosses the matches onto the floor of the room where Saint is talking with the spies. She picks them up, recognizes the monogram, and reads the message written inside. Happening to have the matches gave him an opportunity, but he still had to have the initiative and resourcefulness to take advantage of that opportunity.

Get your hero into bad jams. If you make it too easy for your hero, your audience will feel cheated. Make your hero squirm a bit before he solves the problem.

THE END OF ACT II

The second act customarily ends with the situation looking bleak, hopeless, and tangled. It's the low point or "darkest hour"; the moment when all seems lost. Often it's a cliffhanger. Could this be the end for the Caped Crusader? Maybe the hero almost

gives up—or even *does* give up—and must be persuaded to battle on. Not only has the hero failed to defeat the villain, but the villain is holding the hero's girlfriend captive in his headquarters in the hollowed-out volcano defended by 10,000 ninjas. It makes sense that this low point should occur at the end of act II. The hero's fortunes have bounced up and down all through act II, with surprises—twists and turns, complications, and perhaps rising stakes. By now the hero has invested everything in his quest for the goal and still doesn't have it. That's enough to discourage anyone.

Even in a comedy, there's a darkest hour. Yes, comedy is light and funny, but it's nevertheless about pursuit of a goal that the hero cares about. She may well be discouraged when she hasn't achieved it at the end of act II. Don't worry that sadness at this point will ruin the comic tone of the piece. An admixture of sadness actually improves comedy, as Chaplin proved. Show us your characters' pain.

Act III

Pages 90 through 105 (approximately) will be your third act—your climax and ending, where the hero makes one final push against great odds to accomplish the goal and succeeds or fails. It's about 15 pages long or maybe 20. This is where your story reaches its "resolution," so named because the conflicts are resolved. Somebody wins. Somebody loses.

The third act addresses all the issues raised in the spine. The hero either achieves or doesn't achieve the goal. The central conflict is settled: the combatants win, lose, or sign a binding truce. At the end of *Gone with the Wind*, Rhett surrenders in his battle to possess Scarlett fully. In *Rear Window* Jeff catches the killer. In *Citizen Kane* the reporter fails to discover what "Rosebud" means and opines that it didn't matter anyway. At the end of the film version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Maggie wins her battle to persuade her husband to help her stay in the running for the inheritance. *Goldfinger appears* to be over when Bond foils Goldfinger's attack on Fort Knox but isn't really over until Bond has his final, fatal confrontation with Goldfinger in the airplane.

THE CLIMAX

The climax is the last conflict: the final, decisive battle. Most often, and some would say necessarily, that battle will be between the hero and whatever name was on the other side of the "central conflict": Bond versus Goldfinger, Rhett versus Scarlett, and Stanley versus Blanche.

Casablanca has two climactic battles, both very near the end and both part of the sequence at the airport: one conflict resolves the love plot and the other resolves the adventure plot. The central conflict between Rick and Ilsa is settled in Rick's climactic effort to persuade her to get on the plane—to stay with her husband and give up Rick forever. This is followed by another exciting climax: Rick "persuades" (bang!) the Nazi commander Major Strasser to let the plane take off.

Remember—the climactic battle settles the issue of whether the hero will or won't achieve the goal. Will Rick win Ilsa? Yes—by giving her up. When he says to her, "We'll always have Paris," we know that Paris and Rick are what she'll be thinking of every time she does her tedious marital duty with Victor Laszlo.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION AND THE ENDING

The climactic battle, in addition to determining whether the hero achieves the goal, also often simultaneously answers the central question. This simultaneity (or integration or "double duty") is both neat and satisfying. For example, as Rick settles his climactic battle with Ilsa in *Casablanca*, he also answers the central question: Will he ever realize that his philosophy of selfish isolation is wrong?

In *Psycho* the central question (roughly: "What is this dude's problem?") is answered during the climactic moments when they discover the corpse of Norman's mother, subdue Norman, and unmask him. (Then the central question is explicated more fully in the denouement.)

The key thing to remember about the central question and goal is this: they must be settled as late in the third act as possible, preferably seconds before the end of the film. The main reason why the audience has stuck around so long is precisely

to get the answer to those questions. Don't answer too early. The central question is sustaining the audience's interest, so it only makes sense to keep it alive as long as possible. Don't reveal the ending until the end. And once it's revealed, the people are ready to go, because the movie is over.

THE DENOUEMENT

If the central question isn't answered by the result of the climax, or not answered fully enough, it is answered in the so-called denouement, the section of the script that happens after we see whether or not the hero achieves the goal. It's the part that ties up loose ends (though, paradoxically, *dénouement* means "untying" in French, as in the untying of knots).

Very often the denouement explains leftover issues, especially what will happen to the characters after the story ends.

Sometimes the denouement elaborates on the answer to the central question that we got in the climax. The denouement of *Casablanca*, which has Rick going off to join the Free French forces fighting the Nazis, further addresses the central question of his little selfishness problem, while also telling us what's going to happen to the hero after the film is over (a typical purpose of the denouement).

The denouement must always be short, because audiences literally start packing to go the second they find out whether or not the hero achieves the goal. The goal and central question are what engaged their interest in the first place. Now that their curiosity has been satisfied they're ready to roll. However, if you've charmed them sufficiently and given them characters that they care about, they'll stick around a little longer to find out a few more things—but be quick about it. Remember Dumas: "Last act brief." Briskly settle the spinal issues and get offstage.

Still, if the central question is truly engaging, a longer denouement can work. In *Adam's Rib* Spencer Tracy plays a prosecutor who wants to convict a woman of shooting her husband. His wife, Katharine Hepburn, is defense counsel. The goal, to win the case, is settled considerably before the picture is over. The rest of the picture, the exceptionally long denouement, is dedicated to

answering the central question: will their marriage survive being opposing counsels in court?

Another great example of a long denouement is *Psycho*, where the plot and character are so complex that sorting them out satisfactorily takes a bit of time. As mentioned above, the climax comes when John Gavin and Vera Miles capture serial killer Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins). At that point the narrative is effectively over. But the film spends several minutes answering some remaining questions. Why does Norman cross-dress? A psychiatrist explains his pathology. What will happen to Norman? He'll be locked in a madhouse the rest of his life. Will John Gavin and Vera Miles end up together? Apparently not. And finally—the last shot of the film—will the victim of the theft get back his $40,000 stolen by Marion (Janet Leigh)? We see her getaway car being hauled out of the swamp where Norman sank it and remember that the money's in the trunk.

Many viewers appreciate the luxury of a denouement, but it can also be effective to forego the denouement altogether.

How long should a denouement be if you choose to write one? Short. Two pages is already a longish denouement.

THE HERO SOLVES THE PROBLEM IN ACT III

Way back when you were deciding on your spine, you chose a hero. In doing so, you made an implicit pact with the audience that the hero would be the key person in the movie's situation, the one who solves or doesn't solve the problem. No one but your hero can resolve the central conflict. At the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* a marriage counselor character doesn't come in and persuade Martha of the destructive effects of imaginary children on marital harmony. No, George himself achieves his goal of getting Martha to wake up and smell the bourbon.

This is not to say that the cavalry can never ride to the rescue; it can, but only after our hero has played the key role in single-handedly holding off the enemy long enough for the cavalry to get there. Once the cavalry does arrive, the hero plays a key role in the cavalry's defeat of the enemy, preferably by killing the enemy's top guy (ideally near the edge of a cliff). Heroes

must solve their own problems—achieve their goal or fail—themselves, in the climactic battle. The hero wins or loses the climactic battle; otherwise you've betrayed your spine. If someone else comes in and solves the problem, the audience thinks, "So, why were we watching *this* character when it's the *other* guy who turns out to be important in the end?"

DEUS EX MACHINA

Deus ex machina means "God out of a machine." This Latin phrase refers to the Greek practice (particularly in the plays of Euripides) of having a god lowered onto the stage by a crane at the end of the drama to mete out divine justice or untangle a hopelessly messy situation. Nowadays it's used to describe a resolution where the cavalry arrives implausibly or where some outside force (most egregiously one that hasn't been planted earlier) shows up at the end to resolve the situation in a manner much too convenient for the hero and too easy for the author. It's considered a rookie move because it means that your hero isn't the one settling the issues of the spine and the ending isn't emerging from the internal logic of the plot.

Of course, in some broad comedies such as Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*, the *deus ex machina* is employed in the spirit of parody.

ENDINGS

"All tragedies are finish'd by death, All comedies are ended by a marriage," Lord Byron observed in his poem "Don Juan." The boundaries of comedy and tragedy were stricter then, and part of the definition of the genres was that comedies ended happily and tragedies ended otherwise. Now things are looser, but audiences still feel cheated if an unmitigated comedy foregoes the happy ending. Moreover, audiences often want to see "justice" done at the end of a story. If someone sins, most audiences want to see punishment. Furthermore, the audience wants to see a hero who suffers rewarded.

You don't always have to give audiences what you think they want. Sometimes it's a mistake to try to second-guess them.

Hollywood will tell you that audiences want an unmitigated "up" ending, but *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Love Story* all end with the hero losing the girl. Sometimes the hero gets what he wants, as in *The African Queen*, *His Girl Friday*, and *Goldfinger*; but at other times the hero loses, as in *Breathless*, where he doesn't get the girl and is shot dead by the cops. Sometimes the hero just gives up, as when the hero of *The Bicycle Thieves* despairs of ever finding his stolen bike. In *Rocky* the hero loses the boxing match but achieves his stated goal of "going the distance" (and thus achieving self-respect). So it's up to you whether your third act ends happily, sadly, bittersweetly, ambiguously, or with a ray of hope—as long as you tell us clearly whether or not the hero achieves the goal, succeeds or fails, wins or loses.

People will tell you that you have to know your ending before you begin, but that's not quite true. You certainly need to know your hero's goal and the central question, but whether the hero achieves the goal or fails is something you don't need to know until you write it. In fact, not knowing which way things will tip could be advantageous in that you won't "telegraph the ending" (give it away in advance).

A small, subtle film will have a subtle ending. In Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, which takes place over a single day, the central question is whether Isak will come to understand that he's been a cold man. The quiet way in which Bergman answers the question is exemplary. Very near the end Isak's son comes into his father's bedroom as his father is about to go to sleep. Isak says, "About that money you owe me . . ."

We know that Isak intends to forgive the debt, but the son cuts him off with "You'll get your money." Then someone else comes into the room, and the thread of the conversation is lost. We're left not knowing whether Isak will raise the subject again tomorrow or next week. That's OK, because the film has clearly defined itself as "a day in the life" of this old man. Insofar as the central question can be answered in the course of a day, it's answered. Isak is changed. His change is delicate, and we don't know whether it will persist, but the question has been answered. *Wild Strawberries* refuses to furnish greater resolution

than is usually obtained in a single day of normal human life. It's a sublime example of the delicate dance between satisfying structure and authors' need to have their say: form and content in elegant oneness.

The important thing to remember is that your choice of ending embodies what you as an artist want to say about life.

PLOT AT A GLANCE

Plot holds an audience's attention in two main ways. One is called linearity but might as easily be called continuousness. Every scene in your script (ideally—and remember that nothing is perfect) connects to the scene before it and the scene after it. A scene emerges out of the scene that precedes it. It causes or leads into the scene that follows. This gives audiences no "break" in the hold on their attention: no interruption. It's a moment-to-moment thing that applies to dialogue as well (as we shall see). A leads to B leads to C.

A three-act structure is the second way to hold an audience's attention, but it's not a moment-to-moment thing like linearity—it overarches the whole of the script. It pulls us through to the end as we wait for the issues and questions posed in the spine to be answered.

Act I is the setup, usually between 17 and 35 pages long—certainly no longer. Act I gets the story on its feet and puts all the spinal issues on the table. By the end of the first act we know who the hero is, what she wants to achieve or get (the goal), what we're wondering about as she does so (the central question), and with whom her main conflict is. Then, when all that is clear, the hero sets out on her journey, quest, adventure, or what have you and often has no choice but to proceed because there's no turning back. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy's house lands on a witch, another witch finds out, and Dorothy's in the soup. The only way to get home alive (goal) is to visit a wizard, whom we are presently off to see. The start of Dorothy's journey pivots us from act I into act II.

The second act is the part of the story where you have to invent lots and lots of problems for your hero: twists, turns, com-

plications, reversals, suspense, surprise, obstacles, and various rocks of various sizes, preferably large, hurled at your hero. What *can* go wrong for your hero? Make it go wrong. Act II is very long, so you'll need a lot of rocks. At the end of the second act, things couldn't be worse: the darkest hour.

The theatre expression "Run for the curtain" means hurry up, because the audience sees the end coming. Keep that in mind as you write act III, where everything comes to a head. You answer the questions implied by the spine. The audience sees whether the hero achieves the goal, very often settled in the climax, a final, decisive conflict that is sometimes (not always) between the hero and the other party in the central conflict. The climax settles the question of whether the hero achieves the goal. Also, very often the central question is answered by the climactic battle. Sometimes a very brief denouement wraps things up and lets us know what the hero's life will be after the movie (the title cards at the end of *Animal House* are a great example of this, as is the shot of Rick and Renault sauntering off to war at the end of *Casablanca*). The moment the goal is won or lost and the central question answered, the picture is over.

DEEPER INTO PLOTTING

By now you should have a strong understanding of three-act structure and linearity. As you move through this scaffolding, it helps greatly to understand other principles of dramatic narrative. These principles operate alongside and within your three-act structure.

The dramatist's number one challenge is holding the interest of the audience. The dramatist does this by involving us in the hero's pursuit of a goal. If we care about the hero, we already want the character to win. However, you can use two further methods of increasing the audience's interest and excitement: stakes and jeopardy.

STAKES HIGH AND LOW

We've talked about the issue of stakes in the chapter on spine, but let's review. What's "at stake" is what the hero gets by succeeding versus what the hero loses by failing. We use the word "stakes" for what hangs in the balance, what is won or lost in the conflict: the money on the table. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a marriage and a huge inheritance are at stake, and with them the future happiness of two people. In *Richard III* and *Macbeth* kingdoms hang in the balance. High stakes can make for high drama. But stories can have lower stakes and still be compelling.

The very lowest stake acceptable is the happiness of the hero. If the hero's happiness depends on the outcome, then the stakes are high enough. If we see that the hero does care, we will too. Conversely, if the hero doesn't care passionately about the goal, why should we?

Raising the Stakes

As the story progresses the stakes sometimes rise. In *Goldfinger* Bond starts out knowing only that Goldfinger is up to no good. Later the stakes rise precipitously when Bond discovers that Goldfinger plans to destroy the world's economy by A-bombing Fort Knox.

Then again, the stakes remain exactly the same throughout *The Bicycle Thieves*.

So when people tell you that the rule is that stakes must rise throughout, be skeptical.

ULTIMATELY DESIRE CREATES STAKES

The important thing to remember about stakes is this: the bone of contention, the thing people want, the thing Hitchcock called the McGuffin, isn't what matters most. What matters most is how much people care about it and what they'll sacrifice to get it. Alfred Hitchcock discussed this in filmmaker François Truffaut's classic book-length interview with Hitchcock, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. He gave the example of *North by Northwest*, where the spies are smuggling something out of the country. Asked by the hero what it is, the American spy boss shrugs: "Oh, just government secrets."

"You see," said Hitchcock, "here the McGuffin has been boiled down to its purest expression: nothing at all."

What matters is that people want those secrets and are clearly willing to kill or die to get them. If the characters care passionately, the audience will care passionately. The suitcase in *Pulp Fiction* is an impish example of an abstract McGuffin taken to the extreme.

Defining Jeopardy

Jeopardy is a subsidiary of stakes. The term usually refers to physical danger—the possibility that the character will be hurt or killed. If the villain has tampered with the hero's saddle so that he might fall off the horse and be trampled to death, that's jeopardy. Genres such as action-adventure, thriller, horror, and dis-

aster exist primarily to deliver situations of jeopardy. *Die Hard*, *North by Northwest*, *Saw*, and *The Poseidon Adventure* are all filled with scenes of jeopardy. Very often scenes of jeopardy hinge on whether the character will be discovered as she hides from something (police or peckish dinosaurs) or sneaks into someplace (to steal the jewels or the McGuffin).

The notion of jeopardy can be expanded to include social danger. In the classic screwball comedy *My Favorite Wife* Cary Grant's first wife (Irene Dunne) is lost at sea and presumed dead but returns years later on the very day when Grant has had her declared dead so that he can remarry. They all end up staying at the same hotel where Grant and the new wife were supposed to commence their honeymoon. Will the new wife realize that his first wife is staying in the same hotel? If she does, they're all in for great embarrassment, so there's jeopardy. *I Love Lucy* was the biggest hit in the history of TV precisely because of this kind of social jeopardy.

Almost any potential consequence hanging over the scene can be seen as jeopardy. However, nothing gets the human animal's heart racing faster than mortal peril. Violence and the threat of death are extremely dramatic and hence present in much great drama and often even in great comedy.

Jeopardy and What Might *Happen*

Perhaps the most famous murder in film history is the shower scene in *Psycho*. "This is the most violent scene in the picture," said Hitchcock in *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. "As the film unfolds, there is less violence because the harrowing memory of this initial killing carries over to the suspenseful passages that come later." In other words, once you've shown the audience what the villain is capable of, violence becomes less necessary; we already know what will happen when he catches his prey, so we can concentrate on the suspense of the pursuit.

EXPOSITION

We've talked a lot about caring about characters. That (among

other things) is achieved through another plotting principle called exposition: providing information that the audience needs to understand the meaning of events.

In Michael Myers's James Bond spoof *Austin Powers*, the character played by Michael York is named "Basil Exposition." He's the spy chief who gives Austin his assignment—and simultaneously explains to the audience who the villain is, what he's up to, and what the hero's goal will be in the picture. When people think of exposition, they generally think of something like what Basil provides: information very early in the narrative that situates audiences so that they know what's what and get on with enjoying the story. If the movie began without Basil's speeches, we wouldn't know why Austin bothers chasing those people or even who they are. Fail to provide proper exposition and your audiences won't know what's going on—and if they don't know, how can they *care*?

EXPOSITION OCCURS THROUGHOUT THE STORY (BUT OFTEN EARLY)

Some people assume that exposition occurs only at the beginning of the story. In fact, the problem of conveying the information that the audience needs to understand events is ongoing. Yes, considerably more exposition tends to occur at the beginning, but it is necessary throughout the script. The audience often needs to know something or other.

It is important that exposition be timely. It stands to reason that information that the audience needs to understand the meaning of events should probably be provided before the events that it illuminates, but not so long before that it is forgotten by the time it is needed.

A Scene with (and without) Old-Fashioned Exposition

Here is an example of how exposition engages the audience's interest. Imagine, if you will, that you are your great-great-grandfather and you are at the theater. The curtain opens.

You hear the sound of a key in a lock onstage. A soignée

woman enters and removes her hat and gloves. A man emerges from the study, greets her warmly, and asks with animated interest about her day. He seems fascinated by her shopping trip, inquiring after inconsequential details such as what she had for lunch. Then he returns to his study.

Not very interesting. You think: "What's going on here? His questions make no sense. Who cares about some trivial shopping trip? Maybe I can leave in time to catch the second act of that musical revue with all the pretty girls in it."

Now I ask you to envision the very same scene played once more—but preceded by the appearance of a maid. You see, once upon a time, the curtain opened on act I to reveal a set with a ringing telephone. The maid entered. She was, of course, French, as was the phone.

"Allo? *Mon Dieu*, Yvette! I cannot talk long because the house is in ze uproar and Madame will return presently, forthwith or even anon. The master has discovered her cache of love letters from Lord Ramsbottom and has spent the morning muttering something that sounds very like 'tramp.' And sharpening a large ax! I fear to think what will happen when Madame returns!"

The sound of a key in a lock.

"I must go! Madame is here!"

The scene proceeds exactly as before, but now it's fascinating, due to good old-fashioned, Basil Exposition–style information. Clumsy and obvious? Certainly, but by heaven it's clear, and audiences know exactly why they're watching the scene. With exposition we understand what's going on. We wonder what will happen next. We thrill to the dramatic irony of knowing that Madame is in hot water and doesn't realize it. The point here is that clumsy, obvious, unabashedly narrated exposition is better than no exposition at all. If you can't think of a better way to get the information into the movie than titles scrolling the words "Long ago in a galaxy far away there was a Princess with a funny hair-do who led a revolution and people fought with neon swords," well, do what you must. After all, *Casablanca*, one of the best movies ever made, begins with a voice-over narra-

tor dishing the geopolitical dirt, complete with spinning globe and dotted lines on a map. Exposition did not embarrass the Brothers Warner and should not embarrass you.

Backstory

One kind of information that people associate with the term "exposition" is called backstory. The backstory is history: the part of the story that happened outside the time covered by the movie, before the beginning. (If events from before the beginning are included *within* the movie, they're called "flashbacks" and usually not referred to as backstory.) By definition, backstory is unseen and usually occurred before the action that we see. In *Hamlet* the murder of Hamlet's father is backstory.

Who Are These People?

Very often the crucial bit of expository information that the audience needs is simply who the characters are and what the relationship between them is. For example, we see a 55-year-old man tiptoe into a bedroom where a 20-year-old woman sleeps. He creeps up to the bed, watches her for a moment, strokes her cheek tenderly, pulls the cover up to her chin, and tiptoes out.

Now, if the older man and young woman are husband and wife, this is one scene. If they're father and daughter, it's another. If they're doctor and patient, it's still another.

And if we have no idea of what their relationship is, well, the scene is just meaningless mush.

You might say, "What if audiences find out later what their relationship is—then they'll look back and understand the scene, and how clever a writer I'll seem." No. Audiences usually aren't interested in looking back, which just distracts them from what they're interested in understanding: the scene that's unfolding *now*. Arbitrarily withholding exposition is pretentious and pointless.

Creaky Exposition and Slipping It In

As effective as voice-over narration may be, nowadays it's seen

as quaint. Audiences prefer exposition delivered in a way that is not so obvious.

Beginning writers think that the way to get exposition on the table is to "slip it in" and hope the audience doesn't notice. For example, a character says, "Listen here, brother, I've had enough of your lip."

Doesn't "brother" already know he's the speaker's brother? Then why is the speaker telling him? Any time you have one character telling another character something that he knows the other guy knows, the audience senses that you're doing something cheap and fake. Never have a character tell another character something he knows the other guy already knows. You're making the characters say things for your convenience rather than for character purposes. And when you do that, audiences become aware of gears turning within the mechanism of the narrative—hence the expression "blatant exposition." Audiences are neither stupid nor innocent of the ways of dramatic narrative. They've spent thousands of hours in front of screens consuming narratives. They know how this stuff works. You can't slip it in so they won't notice. This is all they're doing right now: watching your movie.

So how is exposition delivered?

Information as Ammunition

In general the way to deliver exposition is through conflict. Getting people into a disagreement is a great way to expose information. If fact, it's really the only way. After all, your scenes are supposed to be full of conflict and full of exposition—it makes sense to combine the two. A good screenwriting teacher of mine once said, "In conflict, information is ammunition."

Let me repeat that, for it is the most important thing that you can know about exposition: in conflict, information is ammunition.

If you and I get into a dispute, I'm going to bring up everything that I think supports my case. I'll talk about the pros of my position, the cons of your position, things you've been wrong

about in the past, your character flaws, how my position benefits you, why God wants me to win—all manner of things. And you'll do the same. Whether the conflict is over how to rob the Bank of England or which casket to choose for Mom's burial, people naturally pour out information at a furious clip when they are in a conflict—when one character wants one thing and the other wants another. It's like a battle, and the bullets are bits of information.

The wonderful thing about this technique is that nobody will think the writer is "forcing" the exposition because the characters are delivering this information for their own good reasons.

That's the key to acceptable exposition: it's constructed so that the characters are saying it for *their* reasons, not the writer's.

We believe characters when they do things that logically help them toward their goals (just as we question things they do that are obviously inconsistent with their goals). The audience wants and expects characters to behave in ways that further their goals (while at the same time remaining consistent with their characters). A character will not deliver information that supports an opponent's point of view—that would be against her own interests. Never fear, though: her opponent will supply that information.

In a way, maybe it's a little unfair to make fun of Basil Exposition. He tells Austin about the villain because his goal is to have Austin undertake and understand his assignment. His delivery of that information to Austin is in perfect accord with that goal. The character who gives the hero an assignment may be a tired convention, but he's not inherently bad or forced exposition.

Exposition through the Confidant

Sometimes we want to "expose" what the hero is thinking. In another day the character might have delivered a soliloquy, but that device now feels anachronistic to most audiences. A better way to give the hero a chance to vent his feelings, explain himself, and expose his inner conflicts is to provide him with a confidant. A confidant is a character—a goofy sidekick, loyal pal, or

wise counselor—to whom the character confides his thoughts and feelings.

If that is the character's whole raison d'être, the audience will probably catch on and feel conned. But handled skillfully the confidant can be an integral and valuable addition. Just keep in mind that you must have conflict even in the case of a confidant. Otherwise the scenes are just deadly dull "discussions"—blatant exposition. So give your confidant an opposing viewpoint. If it's a love story and the girl is adamant in her dislike of the boy, then maybe the confidant should argue that the guy is a dish. When you need to create conflict between two characters with essentially the same goal, you often create conflict over how to achieve the goal: I want to use brass knuckles, but my sidekick favors a truncheon.

Classic confidants include Captain Renault in *Casablanca*, the video store clerk in *Clerks*, the star's dresser (Thelma Ritter) in *All about Eve*, and "Stumpy" (Walter Brennan) in *Rio Bravo*.

ORDERING EVENTS, REVEALING INFORMATION, AND SUSPENSE

In your screenplay things will happen. It will include "dramatic incidents": scenes of conflict. These move the story forward, changing the situation and providing new information, and must be ordered in such a way that they hold the interest of the audience. The next section of this chapter talks about how to choose and order events: how to tell a story (more about plotting).

A number of concepts are discussed here: suspense, surprise, timing, dramatic irony, and "narrative questions." What they all boil down to is: in what order do things happen, and when does the audience find out what? These are difficult issues that are seldom discussed in screenwriting texts, but an understanding of them gives you the power to arouse and sustain your audience's interest. It is a thrilling power to hold.

Suspense and the Chronological Story

Plotting is the sequencing of information and incidents. Note that I do not say the *withholding* of information. Your job for now is to reveal; the withholding will take care of itself if you reveal in correct order.

Moreover, time itself withholds information. That is why the chronologically told story is often the most effective.

You tell your husband that tomorrow you're going to ask your boss for a raise. You're both in suspense over how the event will come out. No one is withholding information—the event simply hasn't happened yet. The suspense occurs naturally. Now, there's no suspense if you tell the story out of sequence—first we see the scene where the boss denies you the raise and then we see the flashback where you discuss with your husband your intention of asking for it. In inverting the chronology the suspense has been short-circuited.

Who Knows What When?

In the revelation of information, keep in mind that three parties need to be considered: the hero, the audience, and the writer.

The writer knows everything (or should). At any given moment the writer knows what everyone is thinking and most especially knows what the characters and the audience know about the plot.

Audiences sometimes know more than characters on the screen and sometimes know less. They may find out things before a character does or after. But how much information should they have, and when should they have it? In general the audience should learn things when the hero does or a little before.

The hero generally knows what the audience knows or a little less. Seldom more. If I'm watching a film and I learn things as the hero learns them, I'm inclined to identify with the hero, to share her feelings, to feel that I'm along on the journey, and to understand why she's making the choices that she makes. Heroes in dramas, like the rest of us, often make decisions based on the limited information at hand. And that often yields mistakes. So if the hero trusts someone who later turns out to be a Nazi spy,

we think, "Well, I was fooled, too! She made a believable decision given what she knew."

When the audience finds out things *before* the hero knows them, it creates dramatic irony, suspense, and a pleasurable sense of privilege. So if we find out that the man is a Nazi spy and then see the hero mistakenly trust him, we think, "Oh, no! Don't trust him, you fool—he's a Nazi spy! Poor hero—what will happen to her now?!" When we get negative information before the hero does—a glimpse of danger lurking down the road—we feel suspense and dramatic irony (more about these terms later).

It is rarely a good idea for us to find out things *after* the hero does, because that ordering gives us neither identification nor suspense. In fact, if the hero acts on information that we're not privy to, her actions may seem strange, confusing, and even off-putting. "Why doesn't she trust that nice man?" we think, and only later do we find out that all along the hero knew that the man was a Nazi spy.

An exception to our knowing things after the hero knows them is the hero's own feelings and plans—what the hero thinks. Sometimes that information can come as a nice surprise. For example, in *Casablanca* we're sure that Rick in act III intends to betray Victor Laszlo to the Nazis so that he can run away with Ilsa. However, it turns out that his plan is to sacrifice his own happiness and send Ilsa off with her husband. He has changed his mind and his plans without telling anyone, so his actions provide a thrilling surprise. But remember, there's a difference between the hero's feelings and plans, on the one hand, and information about the dramatic situation, on the other. If Rick changed his mind because, say, he found out that Ilsa was going to have Victor's baby, then we should probably know the information about the baby at the usual time: when the hero discovers it or a little before.

Timing

Sometimes writers err in revealing exposition too late. Waiting too long to deliver a piece of exposition can mean leaving audiences in the dark for longer than they want to be there.

Then again, it's possible to give away too much too early, especially in the first act. What's "too much"?

Don't telegraph the ending, telling us what's going to happen. Certainly tell us what has happened (if we need to know it) and tell us what is happening, but don't give away what's going to happen because, as I said before, chronology is inherently surprising. The very nature of time withholds information from us in a tantalizing yet uncontrived way. It's OK for the audience to see danger around the corner—something bad that *might* happen. But once you give away exactly what's going to happen, you're usually lost. In general, giving away the ending is one of the worst plotting mistakes that you can make.

The Problem with Framing Devices

Framing devices, flash-forwards, and fancy structures tend to telegraph the ending and thus often cost more than they are worth. By showing us that the hero comes out of the adventure alive, you've killed the suspense. Very skillful writers have finessed this issue, for example, in *Double Indemnity* and *Titanic* (by giving away part but not all of the ending). Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* tells a whole story backward, but it requires a deft touch and forces the central question (as opposed to the goal) to hold the whole burden of maintaining audience interest.

What's Going on Here? versus What Happens Next?

We all have had the experience of watching a scene and asking ourselves, "What's going on here?" This question is usually the result of not being given some piece of exposition that would render the scene perfectly comprehensible.

It is preferable to understand what's going on in a scene. If the viewers don't understand, they won't care about it; and if they don't care, they won't be interested. People being interested in our scenes is a good thing. We want it.

Therefore the question we wish to generate in the mind of the audience is not "What's going on here?" but rather "What happens next?" That is the question that engages an audience.

To generate that question and thus generate suspense, the audience needs to know what's going on. Suspense can only be generated in the wake of sufficient exposition. Without exposition the narrative question is "What's going on here?" With exposition the narrative question is "What happens next?" An audience wondering "What happens next?" feels pleasurably titillated. An audience left too long wondering "What's going on here?" feels frustrated then numb and finally apathetic.

Of course, "What's going on here?" is often much easier to accomplish, because that question can be raised simply by doing nothing: not telling audiences what they need to know. We have all seen murky movies that don't give us enough exposition to know what's going on. Sometimes such movies are praised as "artistic" or "complex" when they are in fact clumsy or sloppy. To raise the question "What happens next?" you have to expose information. Exposing information is usually harder than withholding it.

The ultimate in withholding information would be not to write the script at all. Just project black screen for two hours. Very artistic, and so much easier.

Creating Specific Questions in the Mind of the Viewer

OK, so plotting is nothing more than the sequencing of information and incidents in such a way that you create in the audience a hunger to know more. You strive to prompt the question "What happens next?" However, the question is never that general. It's always specific: How will Henry Fonda react to Bette Davis's slutty red dress in *Jezebel*? How will Cary Grant warn Eva Marie Saint that James Mason is onto her before she gets on the plane with him in *North by Northwest*? The *best* question is concrete. It's always a variant of "What happens next?" but specific to the situation at hand.

Hitchcock on Surprise versus Suspense

In essence suspense is simply fear that something bad is going to happen to a character. The key is to pose a question or raise

a doubt over what *might* happen without telegraphing what *will* happen.

Suspense is built by revealing to the audience information about what danger lies ahead.

In *Hitchcock/Truffaut* the man known worldwide as the "Master of Suspense" explains suspense versus surprise with an example. Two people sit in a room, talking about this and that. Suddenly a bomb goes off and blows the room to smithereens. That's surprise.

Now, suppose we play the scene again identically in every respect—only this time the audience knows about the bomb. Either there's a shot of it early in the scene or the audience witnessed it being placed there in an earlier scene. And maybe we know that the bomb is set for noon, and a clock shows that it's 11:55. Now we have something even better than surprise, we have *suspense*. The whole time our heroes are talking the audience is thinking, "How can you blithely talk about this and that while a bomb ticks away under the table?" The audience wonders, "Will they find it in time? Who will be killed?" This is suspense, built not by keeping audiences in the dark but by letting them know more than the characters do.

"In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of *surprise* at the moment of the explosion," Hitchcock said. "In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of *suspense*."

Notice that suspense in the latter case is created through dramatic irony—the audience knowing something the characters don't. It therefore relates to the issue of who knows what when. In the case of Hitchcock's bomb, the audience can find out about it *as* the characters do and experience surprise or *before* the characters do and experience suspense.

Hitchcock's explanation of suspense also highlights the importance of exposition. The information about the bomb under the table is, after all, a sort of exposition: it's information that gives the scene meaning. So in a sense suspense is just a matter of the right exposition (information about a hidden danger) at just the right moment (before the explosion).

Suspense Is Usually Preferable to Surprise

Suspense versus surprise is a choice. The writer may reveal the presence of the bomb in advance (suspense) or keep it a secret (surprise). Given a choice, said Hitchcock, the storyteller should usually pick suspense, because surprise affords a fleeting moment of narrative pleasure while suspense suffuses the entire scene with narrative pleasure.

Still, suspense and surprise are both good and necessary forms of narrative pleasure. Every script should have plenty of both.

Truffaut points out in his book that Hitchcock added suspense in subtle ways all the time. In *The Wrong Man* Henry Fonda, falsely accused of a robbery, engages a lawyer to defend him. The lawyer, however, warns that he's not really an expert in the sort of defense that Fonda needs. This is suspense; the meeting with the lawyer, which could have been a drab, ordinary scene, now becomes a source of suspense due to the introduction of a disturbing element, the lawyer's inexperience.

Where does foreshadowing fit into all this talk about suspense? Foreshadowing is not quite the planting of the bomb; it's more the casual mention of bombs so that when bombs show up later in the story we accept it. For example, in *Vertigo* we know from the very start that James Stewart has a fear of heights: when the climax occurs in a high place, we accept his attack of vertigo. His vulnerability was foreshadowed.

Dramatic Irony

Closely related to suspense is dramatic irony, which is simply a situation where the audience knows more than the character on the screen. In dramatic irony we are to the character on the screen as the gods are to us, and that is one of the great pleasures of narrative. In life there's so much we don't know. We're like rats in a maze, groping for answers, turning this way and that, not really knowing the structure of the situation or what's around the next corner. It's the same for characters within a dramatic narrative. They can't see the whole picture. The audience, how-

ever, sometimes gets the privilege of the scientist's perspective on the rats: watching godlike from above, able to make out the configuration of the maze and knowing where the rat's choices will lead. That's dramatic irony: the state of knowing things that the people on the screen don't. It's something that we seldom experience in real life, so getting it in a narrative can provide an audience with a special pleasure. And a good writer controls it by consciously deciding who knows what when. When does the audience know the hero's wife is cheating on him? When does the hero find out? If he finds out after the audience, that's dramatic irony.

Dramatic irony almost invariably creates some kind of suspense. We're watching the baby sitter turn the knob on the cellar door, ignorant of the ax murderer in the basement. But we know, *we know*, and we yell, "Don't go in the basement!" That's dramatic irony—we know where the killer is and she doesn't—and it leads to suspense. Even less jeopardy-filled instances of dramatic irony still create frissons of suspense—if only the suspense of wondering how people will react when the information comes out. What will Sally Field say when she realizes that Mrs. Doubtfire is really her ex-husband? How will Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly react when she finds out that her husband has tracked her to Manhattan?

Suspense and Dramatic Irony May Exist Independently

Suspense can be generated without dramatic irony: Hitchcock's bomb example involves dramatic irony because the men don't know about the bomb and we do. A writer could construct the scene so that they discover the bomb at the same time the audience does—no period of dramatic irony. We'd still experience suspense in regard to whether they will be able to disarm the bomb before it explodes.

When "What's Going on Here?" Works

Sometimes the question "What's going on here?" can be used to good effect, especially early in the story. In the classic thriller *North by Northwest* mysterious strangers kidnap Roger O. Thorn-

hill (Cary Grant) and insist that he is a spy named Mr. Kaplan. He knows that he isn't Kaplan, yet these vicious men insist that he is. Why? The situation is an excellent example of the effective use of the narrative question "What's going on here?"

Hitchcock is not indulging in murkiness for its own sake, however, and the question does not arise merely because the storyteller has inadvertently and/or arbitrarily failed to provide exposition. As always, Hitchcock is in complete control of who knows what when.

So what *is* going on here?

Unbeknownst to Thornhill and the audience, he has been mistaken for a man who does not exist.

Two questions of timing are raised by this scenario. First, when should the audience find out what's going on here? Second, when should Thornhill find out?

If you said, "Tell the audience first," you get a gold star. If we told our hero Thornhill before we told the audience, his actions would change in ways that would make them seem nonsensical to the audience. Identification with the hero would be lost. No, the audience must be let in on the secret either before the hero finds out or simultaneously with the hero finding out.

In this case Hitchcock tells the audience well before he allows the hero to find out because he knows not to keep the audience in the dark for too long.

Thirty-nine minutes into the movie (just a few minutes past a quarter of the way through a 136-minute running time), in a scene set at American spy headquarters in Washington, it is revealed to us that George Kaplan is a fictional construct designed to confuse the enemy. He's just empty suits moved from hotel to hotel by the U.S. spooks to make the villain think "Kaplan" is pursuing him when all along he's really being pursued by another agent. Kaplan is a red herring (see below).

We now know what Thornhill doesn't: he's been mistaken for a man who doesn't exist. We know the shape of the trap he's in before he does. We are to Thornhill as the gods are to us (or as scientists are to lab rats). Hitchcock has very rapidly switched the narrative question from "What's going on here?" to "What

happens next?" Now we know what's going on and spend the rest of the movie eager to know what happens next.

Much later in the narrative, ninety-eight minutes into the film (a little more than two-thirds in), Hitchcock allows Thornhill to be told, on an airport tarmac, why the spies are trying to kill him. We have known this since much earlier in the narrative, so the period between our discovery of the character's situation and the character's discovery has been full of what? Dramatic irony. We knew. Thornhill, meanwhile, was thinking, "What's going on here?"

(By the way, the scene where the spooks reveal that Kaplan doesn't exist is also the scene where we learn that they have no intention of helping him. Roger Thornhill is completely on his own, with no way back. We see the trap, we see that there's no way out, so it's the end of act I.)

Good News Later, Bad News Sooner

In deciding whether to let your audience in on a piece of information sooner or later, the general rule is bad news sooner, good news later. For example, if the hero is breaking into the castle and the guard is asleep, why spoil the suspense by showing us the good news of the snoring guard before the hero tries to sneak past him? Instead show the hero sneaking past *then* give us the shot of the snoring guard. That way you get suspense. Plus a comic moment.

But if the guard is the best archer in the kingdom, by all means let the audience in on that bad news before the hero tries to sneak past him, because it creates suspense. Telling us afterward would be a bore because we've already gotten the good news that the hero survived.

Different Parties Know Different Things

At any point in the narrative, different characters know different things. Moreover, the audience knows some things and doesn't know others. A huge part of your job as writer is to keep track of, to decide, exactly what everyone knows and doesn't know at every moment in every scene. The two most important things

that we can know about dramatic characters are what they want and what they know, and both of those are ever progressing. It's your job to keep up. You must always be in control of when information is revealed to which characters, and when information is revealed to the audience. You must put yourself in all the characters' places and understand what they know when. If I ask you whether your audience or your character knows such and such at this point in the story and you answer, "I don't know," you have lost control of your narrative, so stop and do some thinking.

Surprises

Suspense has to do with fearing a future event. Surprise is the thrill we feel when something totally unexpected happens.

Hitchcock considered suspense superior to surprise, but he understood that a script without surprises feels flat and lifeless. Therefore, when constructing your plot, it is good to include twists and turns.

Keep in mind that the terms "surprise," "plot twist," "reversal," and "complication," while they may have slightly different definitions, nevertheless often refer to the same plot developments and can often be used interchangeably.

TWISTS AND TURNS

A twist is either new, surprising information or a new, surprising development that alters the situation.

The turn is the new direction the story goes, often as a result of the twist.

If at the end of act I your heroine is carried away by a tornado, that's a twist. If as a result of that twist she ends up in a magical land full of Munchkins and witches and has to spend all of act II and most of act III there, that's a turn.

Twists and turns both contain an element of surprise. Surprises are things that we don't see coming—they jump out and go "boo!"

Let's look at an example of a very common situation, the surprise revelation of an explosive piece of information that's a family secret. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* all and sundry, including

Big Daddy and the audience, think that Big Daddy's cancer was cut out of him. However, Doc reveals to Big Daddy's son Brick that in fact Big Daddy is terminal. This terrible surprise makes the situation worse and turns or "spins" it in a new direction.

In *Casablanca* Ilsa tells Rick at the bazaar that she'll never leave Victor Laszlo because—surprise!—"he's my husband and"—surprise!—"was when we knew each other in Paris." Whoa! Bang! Bang! One sentence of dialogue but with a one-two punch of surprise. Nice.

It's important that the surprises that result from a character withholding information be plausible and motivated, not arbitrary. If the character's choice to reveal the information at a particular moment is forced or fake—a result of the writer's goal and not the character's goal—then the surprise will not give the audience pleasure. Ilsa withholds information about her marriage because to reveal it would give the Nazis a lever to use against the underground. Her withholding of the information is motivated and logical, not forced, and therefore the audience does not feel manipulated.

Ilsa isn't the only one with secrets. Rick has one that gives *Casablanca* maybe the greatest surprise ending in the whole history of cinema. Throughout the third act Rick keeps mum about his intention to send Ilsa away with her husband. Why? He fears that if she has too much time to think about it he won't be able to hustle her onto the plane. He has a logical reason (motivation) to keep his plan secret, and therefore doing so does not seem arbitrary or forced. When the time comes to fill out the names on the letters of transit, we expect it to be Rick and Ilsa. Instead he says, "Mr. and Mrs. Victor Laszlo." *What?!* Then he gives the Big Speech in which he persuades Ilsa that if she doesn't get on the plane with her husband the Nazis will win the war and she'll feel bad.

REVERSALS

When a piece of new information in a scene, usually a surprise, causes "a change by which the action veers round to its

opposite" (as Aristotle put it), from bad to good or good to bad, that's a reversal. That is often another way of saying twists and turns.

THE ENEMY WHO'S REALLY AN ALLY AND VICE VERSA

Sometimes the surprise (or twist or reversal) is an ally who turns out to be an enemy or an enemy who turns out to be an ally. At the end of *Casablanca* when Captain Renault orders his men to "Round up the usual suspects" rather than having them arrest Rick, that's an enemy turning out to be an ally (and a delightful surprise).

In the science fiction film *I, Robot* the detective played by Will Smith initially thinks that the robot Sonny is his enemy, until it is revealed that he was in fact on his side the whole time.

COMPLICATIONS

A plot twist that makes the hero's problem worse is also called a complication. Complications do what their name implies—they make the hero's problem thornier, harder to solve. They're usually surprises and often push the story in a new direction. Especially in act II, it's exciting to complicate the situation by making your hero's problem worse.

RED HERRINGS

One way of generating surprise is through the use of a "red herring," a term derived from the practice of dragging a smelly fish across a trail in order to throw off the hounds.

A red herring is a dramatic character or incident that intentionally leads the audience astray. Magicians are masters of the red herring. They create some flashy diversion to pull your attention over here while they palm the queen of diamonds over there. The storyteller, like the magician, always wants to be in control of where the audience's attention is focused.

For example, in a traditional murder mystery, the writer has the upstairs maid act fishy to draw our attention away from the real murderer, the butler. The maid is a red herring. For this to

work, though, we eventually have to find out that the maid had a good reason to act fishy and that it wasn't just for the writer's convenience.

Very often a red herring is useful in misdirecting an audience so that a surprise element is heightened. An example is the *Psycho* shower scene. To show the knife-wielding killer sneaking into the room as Marion obliviously showers would turn it into a scene of suspense. Hitchcock wanted surprise, and to make sure that he got maximum surprise he employed the red herring. "The first part of the story was a red herring," Hitchcock says in *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. "We purposely made the beginning on the long side, with the bit about the theft and her escape, in order to get the audience absorbed with the question of whether or not she would be caught." The audience is worried about the police, but when Marion talks to Norman Bates and decides to take the money back, that danger seems to be over. Hitchcock lulls us into complacency, then—surprise! As Hitchcock said, "You turn the viewer in one direction and then in another; you keep him as far as possible from what's actually going to happen." Compounding the surprise was Hitchcock's daring choice of killing off the biggest star in the film so early in the narrative. He used our expectations regarding Hollywood cinema to trick us; we think that the hero always survives, so the casting of Janet Leigh as Marion was itself a red herring.

PLAUSIBILITY

"Plausibility" is the word we use to describe actions and events that seem acceptably true under the circumstances. It means simply that the events are acceptable to the audience. It's a judgment call. Ask yourself, "Will the audience buy it?"

Or, more elaborately, "Will the audience accept that this person would really do this if she were really in these circumstances and really wanted what she wants in the script?" It's a matter of the character doing what she wants rather than what the writer wants.

Plausible does not mean possible. Many things happen in movies that are not possible, from people fighting duels with

light sabers to Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* single-handedly gunning down a roomful of armed men who all want to kill him. The audience makes allowances for the nature of drama and will accept the impossible.

Neither does plausible mean probable. Many improbable things happen in the movies and are often the more interesting choice. We frequently choose to watch or write a certain story *because* it is improbable, so it would make no sense to forbid the improbable. In *Casablanca* it is not probable that Rick's old girlfriend should stumble into his bar at the exact moment when she does, needing the letters of transit that just happen to have fallen into Rick's lap—in fact it's quite a coincidence, but we buy it, so by definition it's plausible.

Obviously, plausibility is affected by the tone of the piece. A James Bond adventure has a lot more plausibility leeway than a domestic family drama. Also, plausibility can depend on how happy you're making audiences. If they're delighted and you've got them in the palm of your hand, you can get away with more.

STORY LOGIC

Story logic is closely related to plausibility. It's achieved when the chain of events or causality results from an understanding of life and the desires of the characters rather than from the whims of the writer.

Story logic is when one thing leads to another in a way that fits and makes sense. Events and developments that grow naturally out of a certain character in a particular dramatic situation are called logical. When people say of certain plot developments that they "don't make sense," "feel unearned," or "seem to come out of nowhere," it usually means that they defy story logic. Story logic, like plausibility, is a judgment call.

Your story must make sense. Consequences must follow logically from actions. One scene must flow logically to the next. Most of all, dramatic events must occur naturally according to the internal demands of the story, not according to the whims of the writer.

SUBPLOTS

A subplot is a minor or secondary story that happens alongside and preferably connects to and intersects with the main plot at points. Subplots have a long and venerable history. From the time of Plautus and Terence to Shakespeare and beyond, it was customary to have a main love story (often between two aristocrats) and a subplot (often involving love between two of their servants). The separate subplot is not nearly as common as it once was, and sticking to a single main plot (or spine) tends to be the most effective way to sustain audience interest. Hitchcock tightly integrated his mystery plots with his love subplots so that they were virtually the same thing.

COINCIDENCES COME EARLY IN THE PLOT

Coincidences are tricky. I've heard it said that you're permitted one coincidence per screenplay (usually early on), and I find it hard to disagree.

Certainly it is easier to get away with coincidences early in the script. A major coincidence that happens early in the story strikes viewers as the reason they're watching the story. The coincidence is the very premise. As noted, at the beginning of *Casablanca* the letters of transit just happen to drop into Rick's lap. The next thing you know his long-lost ex, whom he last saw on another continent, walks into his bar needing those very letters of transit. That's a coincidence that we wouldn't buy if it happened later—say, if the letters fell into Rick's lap late in act II. Introducing the striking coincidence late in the story impresses the viewer as too easy and convenient for the writer and therefore as a cheat. To *solve* the hero's problem in act III with a striking coincidence is especially unsatisfying to audiences, who want to see the ending "earned."

What holds for coincidences pretty much holds for all highly improbable elements: introduce them early in the story. Audiences will accept a lot early in the story if you don't belabor it. Just wrap your improbable plot premise in a piece of bacon, shove it down their throats, and get on with your story. Don't

dawdle. If they gag for a moment, they'll soon forgive and forget—if what follows is yummy.

Coincidences You Don't Need

Another rule about coincidences: you can get away with them when you *don't* need them for plot reasons. In other words, if you use a coincidence because it's the easiest way to force the plot where you want it to go, the audience will catch on and consider you inept. But the coincidence may be more acceptable if it doesn't buy you anything and doesn't solve a plot problem. Remember, any time you take the easy way out and do something merely because it's convenient for the writer in solving a dramatic problem, audiences will see the plot's gears in motion and be annoyed.

Coincidence and Comedy

An exception to the rules on coincidence is broad comedy, where coincidences can happen more frequently. Examples of this might be seen in many farces (the countess just happens to walk in while the count's trousers are down) and in any episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld*: at the end of an episode one character often discovers that another character's plot line hooks up in weirdly coincidental ways. Outrageous coincidences are funny precisely because they're so "wrong"—the audience understands that they are inappropriate and therefore funny. By employing coincidences the narrative has broken the rules of narrative.

LOOKING AT LINEARITY

A film is said to be sticking to its spine if it has no subplots: if every scene includes the hero, who is always pursuing the main goal and always engaged in the central conflict. Films that stick so closely to their spines are very linear narratives. They don't deviate from the straight line drawn from the problem to the solution: no stopping to smell roses, ambling down a comic byway, or lingering over character development. Action-adventure films tend to be more linear, but they aren't the only ones. *The Bicycle Thieves*, except for a scene or two, is pretty much always on spine.

Linearity is wonderfully engrossing because it engages audience interest and doesn't let go. There's no break in the chain of engagement, which can happen when the writer jumps about among plots and subplots or wanders off onto digressions.

Linearity is an ideal toward which we strive, but not all scripts are completely linear. Nor would we want them to be. While linearity is undoubtedly the most powerful tool for holding the interest of an audience, remember also that holding the interest of the audience is not the writer's sole goal. Maybe you want to convey how it felt to be fourteen and desperately in love. Maybe you want to paint a portrait of the gentle Africans among whom you spent two years in the Peace Corps. People have lots of reasons to write a script. Linearity is a wonderful tool for holding the audience's interest while you accomplish your purpose but isn't necessarily an end in itself. It's a way of keeping the audience listening while you say what you want to say. It's OK that not all plots are completely linear. Let's explore some of the ways in which scripts deviate from strict linearity.

The Meandering Script

The meandering script heads toward its resolution but takes its time getting there, wandering here and there along the way in search of bits of interesting character behavior, beautiful speeches, and philosophical rumination. *Hamlet* is a good example. So is *Clerks*. These scripts know where they're going but take the scenic route. They are not so much in a hurry to get where they're going that they don't have time to exult in language, indulge character, and linger over interesting moments.

The Tangential Script

The tangential script veers off onto tangents, which abruptly end, bringing us back to the spine. This shape is very often characteristic of comedies, which see an opportunity for an extended "comic bit," stray off onto a side road for laughs, and then cut back to the main highway (the spine). *The Gold Rush* and *Austin Powers* are examples.

If a film has marvelous comic bits that could be cut without

"disordering the whole," does Aristotle's definition of unity require that they indeed be cut? Perhaps comedy is a special case. While a comedy certainly shares the goal of telling a story with other kinds of narrative, it also has another aim: getting laughs. If it wanders afield a bit, gets its laughs, and promptly scurries back to its spine, well, I won't tell Aristotle if you won't—but only if it actually gets laughs.

In classic MGM musicals such as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band Wagon*, the musical numbers often have a somewhat tangential quality, yet no one would say they should be cut.

Serious films can have tangents too. A scene in screenwriter Cesare Zavattini's otherwise very linear *The Bicycle Thieves* illustrates this. The victimized worker Ricci and his son stop for pizza and enjoy a pleasant interlude. The tangent is earned because the film is otherwise so rigorously "on spine."

The Episodic Plot

The weekly episodes of most TV sitcoms may be viewed in pretty much any order: who cares? Each episode is complete in itself. They are independent, freestanding, discrete units. When they're over, things are pretty much where they were at the start. They are undeniably part of a whole—the series—but any episode may be switched with another or removed completely without causing any particular disruption in the series. Each episode usually has a linear story, but the episodes themselves generally don't depend on the context of other episodes (assuming the absence of plot developments that span across several episodes).

The term "episodic" can also apply to the plot of an individual feature film. An episodic movie plot is made up of a number of independent, freestanding units that could be shuffled or omitted without disturbing the whole. Such a structure is uncommon in Hollywood feature films but occasionally turns up in foreign cinema (for example, Fellini's *8½*) and obviously departs from the notion of Aristotelian unity. In a unified, linear plot, where the story is always changing and advancing, moving a scene from the first act into the third act wouldn't work at all because by act III the situation is completely different. In a unified Aris-

totelian plot all the scenes are necessary because they're integrated into the whole: any scene that *could* be cut without causing disruption *would* be cut.

It's easy to see why episodic plots are less effective in holding an audience's attention. A plot that never stops progressing and advancing—that sets up narrative questions and doesn't resolve them until the end—engages our interest at the beginning and then doesn't let us go because it doesn't answer the questions. It doesn't end before the end.

In contrast, an episodic plot poses questions then resolves them and moves on to another episode. The next episode, whole unto itself, must engage our interest afresh. Stop, start, stop—start again. And beginnings are the hardest part for audiences; they have to experience a learning curve until they understand the situation and know why they should care. Once the story is rolling, the audience doesn't have to work at paying attention. But the episodic script, which in a way is made up of a series of smaller narratives, forces audiences to repeat the work of beginning something anew several times—engaging their interest in the plot—and runs the risk of hitting a point where viewers say, "You know, I get the point and I'm not signing on for another hitch." It's terribly easy for the viewers to check out when one episode has been completed and another is about to begin.

Examples of episodic plots that compound the problem by making the episodes repetitious include Thornton Wilder's play *The Skin of Our Teeth* and Federico Fellini's film *Nights of Cabiria*, which contain episodes in which characters repeatedly face the same situations, which keep turning out the same way.

The Wavy Narrative Line

It is not enough, however, to have a straight, linear structure. The line of action must rise and fall. Imagine a graph sort of like the ones used for the stock market. The horizontal axis of the chart is time. The vertical axis is price. Your fortune rises and falls over time.

Now imagine that the chart graphs not stocks but your hero's

successes and failures in pursuit of the goal. The horizontal axis is still time, but now the vertical axis is "hero's fortunes." Over the course of the script, the hero's fortunes rise and fall. Each stroke on the graph represents a scene—it starts at one point and ends at a point higher or lower than the first, depending on whether the scene went well or poorly. A line that slants upward represents a scene in which the hero makes progress toward the goal. A line slanting south represents a scene in which the hero suffers a setback. Up and down, up and down. Sometimes the hero will have a few triumphs in a row—up, up, up, up. Sometimes things will slide downhill for several scenes—down, down, down—until the hero gets a break. Sometimes what the hero tries works; sometimes it backfires.

Will any of the scenes be flat lines? Probably not. If a scene is neither success nor failure the audience is likely to ask, "Why did I watch that?" It is that constant up and down motion that keeps alive our interest in whether the hero will accomplish the goal or not.

Film scholar Howard Suber at UCLA lectured that this was the "wavy narrative line," and it is by far the most common pattern. The hero wins some, loses some.

However, other patterns for the hero's fortunes can be imagined. A line sloping ever upward would represent a narrative in which the hero always succeeds. That quickly becomes horrifically boring.

One long downward-sloping line would be a story in which the hero suffers only failure. Joel Schumacher's film *Falling Down*; *Edmond* (based on the David Mamet play and starring William H. Macy); and even to some degree F. W. Murnau's silent classic *The Last Laugh* (until the tacked-on and implausible happy ending) more or less follow this pattern. It can work.

An inverted "V" could represent the "rise and fall" structure of a gangster movie such as in *Scarface* with Al Pacino, but within that V would be the ups and downs of the wavy narrative line.

The takeaway? Give your hero plenty of problems and setbacks, and you'll be fine.

MUST PLOTS BREATHE?

When people say they're letting the plot "breathe," they mean that they're taking time out for the characters simply to interact in a way that expands character but doesn't necessarily move the plot forward: banter, quirky behavior, and moments of color. You earn your breathing space with long stretches of script that consistently advance plot. If you've done that well, a breathing spell might be welcome; but it must be earned. Obviously, different kinds of stories will contain varying amounts of breathing room. A taut thriller has little time to breathe. A plot intended primarily as a character study has more. A script that's all breathing is just hot air.

DEEPER PLOTTING AT A GLANCE

This chapter has introduced you to some ideas that supplement the two main ideas about plotting: linearity and three-act structure.

The stakes are what's won or lost if the hero succeeds or fails. They may be high—the outcome of World War II depends on breaking the code—or they may be small—Christmas will be ruined if Santa doesn't bring that air rifle—but the stakes are high enough if you convince us that the hero's happiness depends on the goal. Make clear in act I that the hero wants the goal badly and you're fine.

Exposition means information the audience needs in order to understand the meaning of events, very often "Who are these people and what is their relationship to each other?"

In conflict, information is ammunition. In selecting your scenes of conflict, keep in mind that your characters need opportunities to fire information at each other.

Suspense results when we are shown that something dangerous is around the corner. Given a choice, suspense is usually but certainly not always preferable to surprise. Complications, reversals, and plot twists are all more or less forms of surprise, and you want plenty of them, especially in act II.

Something is plausible when the audience believes it. A plot

follows story logic when it makes sense and when the inevitable consequences of a plot choice are acknowledged, not swept under the rug.

Plots don't have to be 100 percent linear; they might meander, go off on tangents, or breathe, but they have to get back to the spine sooner or later.

THE SCENE

Dramatic writing is composed of scenes. Only scenes.

Prose fiction, in addition to scenes, has the luxury of summary, which is the encapsulation of action and thought in narration: a narrator tells the story rather than it being played out by the characters in scenes.

Scenes take place in real time.

Summary might compress two decades into a paragraph. For example, a novel might say:

"It was two decades since Charlie had seen Juanita and in those years the hurly-burly of a sour marriage to a wife (who had included Charlie in her knife act at the circus) had transformed him into a stooped, gray shadow. Lana, the knife-thrower, shrewish and trampy from the start, had finally left Charlie for his own grandfather, but not before making sure Charlie knew what a weak excuse for a man she considered him to be. Juanita's had been another story. She had enjoyed a lengthy affair with a legendary Albanian performance artist who died suddenly, leaving her a lovely child, magical memories, and 400 million of whatever currency Albania uses. Charlie knew none of this that fateful day that he saw Juanita through the window of the launderette, walked in, tapped her on the shoulder, and smirked, 'It's me!' He suddenly realized that he needed a shave. She slapped him hard."

That paragraph is all summary except for Charlie walking into the launderette, speaking just two words, and getting slapped. All the rest of the information is summary. If you were writing an

adaptation (which is not what this book is about: you're writing an original) you'd have to find a way of getting it into scenes—enacting it, revealing it in dialogue, or something. You could just do it all as voice-over narration, but that would be cheap, easy, and boringly undramatic. You could write flashbacks, but they're tricky and a little old-fashioned. You'd decide simply to cut a lot of it.

The point?

Screenplays are made of scenes. You'll have to write a scene.

SHOW US, DON'T TELL US

"Show us, don't tell us" means play out the action in scenes as opposed to narrating as in a novel: scene versus summary. It does *not* mean that physical action is somehow always superior to the spoken word. If that were the case, the films of George Cukor, Eric Rohmer, Joe Mankiewicz, Preston Sturges, and Anthony Asquith would be inferior to any silent film ever made. Visual and aural information are both cinematic—as long as they are both contained in scenes of conflict.

WHAT IS A SCENE?

The span of time or pages in which a piece of physical or verbal dramatic action is played out in real time (usually continuous) is called a scene.

A scene generally includes a character with a goal engaging in a conflict that has a particular outcome that is either good or bad. The scene often transpires in a single location. A scene is usually continuous, taking place in real time without interruption (except in a montage or a scene including jump cuts).

For example, if we were writing an adaptation of *The Knife-Thrower's Husband*, we might find it necessary to make the paragraph above into a scene. It would begin, not end, with the slap. The hero of the scene would be Juanita and her goal would be to persuade Charlie to tell her where he's been all these years—neatly coinciding with the writer's goal of getting the exposition into the scene but quite plausible. We need conflict in every

scene, so we make Charlie hesitant to tell, embarrassed by his reduced state. We also want more exposition, so Charlie demands that Juanita give him information about her past in return.

A good scene changes the situation of the character, as this scene did for Charlie; he now knows that Juanita thrived without him. Now, if the plot is linear, his new knowledge will propel him into the next scene (the plot will advance).

So, as you see, a scene includes character, goal, conflict, and outcome—a little story within the larger one. It is a conflict within the larger conflict, a battle in the war.

The basic building block of dramatic plotting is the scene. Your story—your screenplay—is a succession of scenes just as a sentence is a succession of words and a wall is a succession of bricks. A scene is a discrete unit, with its own sort of wholeness in and of itself yet integral to a larger whole. The scene grows out of the scene that precedes it and leads into the scene that follows. They are tied together, usually by causality.

WRITE IN MASTER SCENES

In the old days scripts were written with just about every camera angle specified. The current custom is to write screenplays in master scenes.

A master scene simply tells us where we are (location) and then proceeds to tell us what the characters do and say. Period. A master scene does not include a "shot breakdown," meaning that you don't include camera directions (no "POV," no "CLOSE-UP"—none of that). A script written in master scenes leaves those decisions to the director, who undoubtedly thinks she knows more about what should be done with cameras than you do. It also reads much more smoothly.

MAKE YOUR SCENE ABOUT ONE THING

Decide clearly and exclusively what the scene is about before writing it. An unfocused scene is one in which you have not firmly chosen the one conflict for the scene. Even expository scenes early in the script need a conflict. A properly written scene is about *one* thing: the playing out of a single conflict.

The trick is to pick the one conflict that will enable you to move effortlessly through the exposition that you need at this point in the narrative. This means picking your combatants and their battles shrewdly.

EVERY SCENE HAS A SPINE

Making art is making decisions. If you have a hard time understanding the concept that a scene needs to be about one thing, then impose on yourself the discipline of giving every scene you write a spine (hero, goal, and central conflict will suffice). Many people do this instinctively. But if your scenes are rambling attempts to slip in a series of expositional points, then by all means come up with a full spine for the scene and stick to it.

THE SCRIPT AS A WAR, THE SCENE AS A BATTLE

If a screenplay is a war that a hero fights to get something that he wants, a scene is a battle in that war. For example, your hero's goal in the overall film may be to kill the king. The goal in a particular scene may be to trick the guard at the gate into momentarily abandoning his post. The effort to trick the guard is a battle that must be won along the road to winning the war. So the scene has a spine. Hero: the assassin. Goal: trick the guard into abandoning his post. Central conflict: assassin versus guard.

The trick to plotting is picking just the right series of battles—the right scenes or steps.

THE SCENE CHANGES THE SITUATION AND WON'T BE REPLAYED LATER

The most interesting battles are decisively won or lost. A battle that's a draw isn't as satisfying. A scene ideally should be a crisp movement upward or downward in the hero's fortunes. Along with being clearly good or bad for the character—won or lost—the scene should change the situation. Otherwise, why show it? Take, for example, a scene of a young woman trying to persuade her drunken father to pay her college tuition. The scene ends with the father refusing. That issue is settled, so the situation has changed—now the young woman has to find another way to pay

the bill. Perhaps in the next scene she persuades her roommate to rob a liquor store or persuades her minister to give her a job playing organ for the choir. Once the character has moved on, audiences don't want to see the scene with the father replayed. They don't want the girl to go back to the father three scenes later and once again try to talk him into paying her tuition and once again fail. They want the story to move on up the mountain. The plot has advanced beyond that. Audiences don't want to see a scene that they've already seen.

WHAT YOU THE WRITER NEED TO KNOW IN THE SCENE

In the chapter on plot we explored questions of who knows what when. Plot is the sequential revelation of information. The managing of audience interest is very often a matter of what characters and the audience know about the situation and when they know it.

The writer knows everything. But what does that mean in this context?

For one thing, you always know what every character wants at any given moment. So, in deciding what a scene is to be about, you will take into account what every character in the scene wants. Not just what the characters want in general but what they want at this precise juncture of the story. Don't know? Decide!

And it doesn't hurt to know what each character wants the other characters to feel. Very often what I want is tied up with how I want someone else to feel.

The author also knows exactly what each character knows about the situation. Does Joe know the truth about the terrible family secret or hasn't he found out yet? What he knows or doesn't know will determine what he says and does.

It is also helpful to know what each character thinks of the other characters. If Joe thinks Maria is trustworthy, he'll use one means to persuade her; but if he suspects she's treacherous, he'll use another.

You will find that all the "character bios" in the world are no

substitute for knowing what the characters know about the situation, what they want in this scene, and what they think about the people they're dealing with.

TACTICS ARE CHARACTER

Knowing those things puts you in a position to select tactics for your characters within each scene. Tactics are where the rubber of character hits the road of plot: where character *becomes* plot. The actions that the characters perform to achieve their goals in the scene and how they perform them become the story. They *are* plot and *reveal* character. Two characters might pursue the same goal, but a French singer will use tactics different from those of a Chinese warlord. Character lies in what people want (goals) but also in how they go about getting it (tactics).

A scene is usually a matter of one character getting another character to do what he or she wants. Charlie wants Tori to marry him. Bob wants Carolyn to sleep with him. Clara wants Olivia to smuggle the diamonds. Captain McGillivary wants Hitler to die. Characters with various goals will use a variety of tactics. A character might cajole, threaten, coax, request, demand, intimidate, seduce, debate, trick, scheme, lie, reveal, blackmail, torture, reason, bargain, beg, flatter, charm, or guilt-trip. The character will pursue the goal "in character."

A certain professor once told me the following story to demonstrate the concept of tactics: "When I was younger and pregnant with my third child, a muscular male student came to me and asked me to change his grade. He humbly begged me to change the 'D' to a 'C' so he could graduate without taking the course over. I said no—that I felt he'd done D work and the grade was fair. Suddenly, viciously, he snarled, 'I know where you live.' I changed the grade."

When one tactic isn't working, people switch—perhaps suddenly—to another. New tactics add variety to the scene and dimension to the character and when handled right can even be a wonderful source of comedy (it's often funny when people turn on a dime because it reveals that they were insincere—that their previous posture was merely a tactic).

Tactics are often a matter of one character trying to make another character feel a certain way. I want to seduce you, so I use the tactic of making you feel safe, cherished, or appreciated. I want to blackmail you, so I use the tactic of making you feel frightened.

HOW LONG IS A SCENE?

A common rule of thumb says that a film script consists of forty scenes of approximately three pages each. As with most rules in art, however, this is far from hard and fast. Some say the ideal comic scene is a page and a half long. If scenes are shorter it follows that there will be more of them. Complicating matters further are examples such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*: one, single, unbroken scene that lasts eighty minutes (but made up of a number of what they call in the theatre "French scenes," marked not by an edit but by characters' entrances and exits).

Though the "typical" scene in a screen drama may be three pages long and the "typical" scene in a comedy might be a page and a half, scenes will range from a high of four or even five pages (rarely and only when justified) to less than half a page—or even just a single shot, such as the killing of Miles Archer in *The Maltese Falcon*. Cinema is a marvelously elastic medium, much more so than the stage. That's one reason why it's easier to write a screenplay than a stage play (though anyone who can write a screenplay can learn to write for the stage). Furthermore, exceptions must be made for particular scripts and particular writers.

Still, avoid composing your script entirely of very brief scenes. I have seen screenplays that are made up primarily of scenes as short as a third of a page, with only a few scenes longer than a page. This gives your work a nervous, jumpy, jarring effect.

And if you find you have a scene that's eight pages long, look again and see if it's really one scene.

Character-driven stories such as family dramas tend have fewer scenes that are commensurately longer. Plot-driven stories such as action-adventures or thrillers tend to have more and shorter scenes. Why? The longer the scene, the more room you

have to manifest character. It only makes sense that the longer people engage, the deeper they'll go. More time in the scene means more time to explore the nooks and niches of the players' psyches.

INCLUDE THE IMPORTANT, EXCLUDE THE TRIVIAL

Some writers have a faulty instinct as to what weight each thing should be given. They'll spend a mere page on a terribly important confrontation, but then they'll squander a whole page on something so trivial that it should be handled in a line.

Making art is making decisions. Selecting and rejecting. Including and excluding. A script must be efficient because there's no time to waste. In a novel you might digress for thirty pages on how the hero turns over in bed, but no movie (save Andy Warhol's *Sleep*) would ever choose to include that: we haven't got the luxury of time.

Therefore one of the tricks of screenwriting is selecting incidents that get your point across with one single example or incident that stands for, encapsulates, encompasses, or combines major issues in the plot. In other words, pick one single conflict that does several things at once—character, exposition, plot, and subplot. The more strands wound together in a single conflict in a single scene, the more levels of interest are engaged. This is "integration" (discussed elsewhere at length). Pick one conflict. If Sergeant Nickman is "always" verbally abusing his son, just write one clear and effective scene of him verbally abusing his son and move on. We'll get it. We'll generalize his character from it.

MILKING

Find the drama in the scene and milk it. Brevity is good; but when you find a good conflict, fight it through. The scene where the husband tries to persuade his wife not to leave him for committing adultery is potentially full of emotion, conflict, stakes, and opportunities to dredge up the past (exposition). Don't blow it off in half a page. Milk that scene!

VAGUE SCENES

Another thing to avoid in your scene is vagueness. A vague character makes a vague scene. What are vague characters? Characters who don't know what they want. That's not to say that a character can't pussyfoot around as a tactic. Say, for example, that your character is a diplomat. You don't want her to be too "on the nose." A diplomat speaks in euphemisms, circumlocutions, and riddles—after all, she's a diplomat. Nevertheless, she needs a firm sense of what she wants. And if you, the writer, know where she's going, what she wants to achieve, then even her obfuscations will feel like they have forward momentum.

Vague people make vague scenes. Decisive people make strong scenes: characters who know what they want and go after it. Be wary of characters who aren't committed to a goal. (Even a character whose goal is to avoid action can be compelling if he knows that those are his goals and pursues them in character.)

SETTING THE SCENE

We've talked about dramatic construction as a series of decisions, with the most significant decisions made first. In deciding what the scene is about, the important decisions are (1) who wants what and (2) what conflict will achieve it. Unfortunately, a lot of beginning writers think that choosing location is the first and most important decision. The key decision is what happens, not where it happens. Setting is secondary to the conflict. Still, setting is a memorable and striking element of any scene, and an interesting setting can add a lot. Contrast can be especially striking. For example, the strangling in *Strangers on a Train* takes place at a carnival, which provides a striking contrast of carefree fun and gives the director opportunities for visual interest.

Settings That Give the Scene "Theatricality" or Resonance

Hitchcock often sets important events in public places or even theatres, such as in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, where a spy (who also happens to be a performer) is assassinated onstage. Any setting is theatrical if it's public and includes an audience—be they snooty

diners at a fancy restaurant or rubberneckers at a crash. The climactic scene in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* places Doris Day in London's Royal Albert Hall, a theatrical setting that also has the resonance of a famous monument. In a brilliantly played scene, she has to disrupt a musical performance in order to prevent a murder. The setting makes her task all the harder—who would dare to scream out a warning when that scream will shatter the dignity of a concert hall? But scream she must.

In a theatrical setting the reaction of the crowd adds weight and emotion to a scene. The quality of theatricality is present in any setting where people are watching (and probably judging) your behavior—where they can function as witnesses, cheerleaders, or Greek chorus. Even a single onlooker can heighten the emotion of a scene. For example, when Rick meets Ilsa at the bazaar in *Casablanca* and she tells him that she's married, their exchange has a witness: the local merchant. His reaction to the sexual undercurrent in their conversation adds comedy.

The wrong setting saps oomph. Scenes taking place on telephones or computer screens lack the visual and dynamic possibilities offered by putting the characters together in a space. And try not to plop your characters into a bar or restaurant for want of a better idea. A well-chosen setting operates on multiple levels. For example, the Albert Hall in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is not only a sacred space that contrasts with the disruptive violence that occurs there but also resonates with the successful singing career that the heroine gave up to marry a doctor.

Let's walk through the process of choosing a setting for a scene. Suppose, for example, you have a story about a guy whose wife is divorcing him because he doesn't make enough money. First, you choose your conflict: she wants to go, he wants her to stay. The scene where he begs her not to go could happen in the bedroom, in the living room, or on a roller coaster. From the point of view of plot, the important thing is the conflict or clash of wills, so to a degree it doesn't matter where the scene takes place. However, suppose you set it at his workplace. Maybe he's performing his humiliating McJob at a burger joint when she comes in, orders a burger, and tells him that she wants a divorce

on the side. Now they play the scene. He begs her not to leave. She's adamant. Meanwhile our hero ignores his boss, who's demanding that he get back to flipping burgers, and the growing Greek chorus of increasingly impatient customers listening to every intimate word between the man and his wife. The scene could be played as Kitchen Sink drama or raucous comedy. Either way, it's heightened by the theatricality of witnesses.

Comedy is often made of embarrassing behavior and heightened by the presence of shocked onlookers. Misbehavior is always funnier when it's in front of a roomful of people in evening clothes—just ask Larry, Moe, and Curly. A pie fight at the opera is hilarious. A pie fight among the people who live under a bridge is just sad.

Obviously, theatricality isn't always the right choice. Suppose you have a scene of mortal jeopardy. There's a famous scene in *North by Northwest* where Cary Grant is chased by a crop duster. He's alone in a bright, flat, featureless landscape, with no place to hide and no one to help.

ARE YOU READY TO WRITE SCENES?

Now you know what a scene is, so you'd better write a few, right? Maybe wait. For one thing you don't know how a scene is formatted. More importantly, you don't have a structure or outline for your story, so you don't yet know precisely what scenes are needed. Why write scenes that will ultimately be cut? Better to plan your story in advance and know exactly what needs to be accomplished so that you can write as efficiently as possible. Just keep jotting down all your brilliant inspirations; they're going to come in handy for your next set of important decision: the step outline.

THE SCENE AT A GLANCE

A scene is action played out in real time, as opposed to summary, which is action summarized in narration as in prose fiction. "Show us, don't tell us" means "Dramatize with scenes, don't narrate as a novel would."

Someone once said that if a script is a war, the scenes are the

battles in that war. You win some and lose some, but each one is a conflict. Someone has a goal, comes up against an opponent or obstacle, and wins or loses. Cut to next scene.

The scene has a spine, in that there's a hero, a goal, a conflict, and an outcome that changes the situation.

Picking the right location for the conflict helps the scene pop.

Don't pad; but if you have a rich premise for a scene, find all the dramatic possibilities. That's milking the scene. Writers get nervous and want the scene over with, so they rush through the scene and out the other side. "I have to get this scene over with" is a form of thinking about outcome. Relax and have fun with the scene—once you have a step outline.

THE STEP OUTLINE

This book is not about making it up as you go along. Though spontaneity and inspiration are necessary ingredients, they need the context of a well-planned structure. Striking images, witty lines, and memorable moments will all come to you, but they will be more appropriate and hold the attention of the audience better if they grow out of a structure that is lean, clear, and advancing ever forward.

Such a structure results from the crucial step outline. It's the second hardest task in the screenwriting process, after the spine, but abundantly rewarding in the end. Constructing a good step outline guarantees that writing the actual scenes will be shockingly fun and easy. And once you know how to do it and aren't so anxious about it, the very act of composing a step outline is enormous fun.

A step outline sounds simple enough: reduce every scene to a single sentence that encapsulates the main action of the scene—in essence, boil the scene's spine down to a single sentence.

The step outline is quite simply a list of the scenes of conflict that you will write.

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T WRITE A "TREATMENT"—AT LEAST NOT YET

Some people will tell you to write a treatment as an intermediate step in creating your screenplay. A treatment is a brief prose description of a movie that you intend to write. It varies in length depending on its purpose. If you're pitching an idea to producers, sometimes they'll ask for a one- to three-page treatment

that summarizes your pitch, perhaps to show to colleagues or to remind them of the idea's main features. It's a sales tool.

At other times writers write a treatment as an intermediate step in developing the story before setting out to write the actual script. Such treatments can range from five to thirty pages or more. I've heard of European filmmakers creating treatments that are more than a hundred pages long. On this continent we call that a novella.

For beginning writers, I do not recommend writing treatments. They confuse the process. After all, treatments are prose, which tells stories differently than does drama (which of course we just learned in the chapter on the scene). Prose offers great flexibility as to where and how information can be introduced. It includes both scene and summary, and summary covers a lot of ground in a way that is very different from dramatic narrative. In drama in general, and in screenwriting in particular, there is only one really right way to convey story: scenes of conflict.

So what if you have worked out an entire satisfying story in prose form—a treatment? You still must turn it into a drama. In fact, that's exactly what people who write screen adaptations of novels do: turn prose into drama. It ain't easy, so why take your idea through the prose phase at all? You've seen movies based on novels that you've read, so you know novels and movies are very different things. Prose and drama tell stories differently and that ultimately means that they must tell different stories. That's why writing your screen story first as a prose treatment is a detour into the world of prose fiction that can actually confuse and mislead you.

Ergo, the best way to plan your script is to create an outline: a list of scenes.

"I DON'T FEEL LIKE PLANNING MY SCRIPT"

Perhaps you say (with a sneer reminiscent of Mickey Rooney in the early scenes of *Boys Town*, I hope), "So what? I don't feel like planning my script. I'm impatient to get on to the fun of writing actual scenes. Writing an outline bores me and makes me feel vaguely anxious. Besides, that's not creativity, it's . . . account-

ing, or something. I'm just going to start writing scenes without an outline."

That's what I said when I was a beginning writer, so it means a lot to me to persuade you that step outlining is to your advantage.

PLANNED SCENES ARE EASY TO WRITE

My aim is to make screenwriting as easy as possible for the beginner—to guide you to success the first time you address the task. It is my experience that if students just have the patience and faith to work hard on an outline, then the actual writing of scenes will be easy. That's because writing the scene itself is virtually automatic when you know exactly what the scene is about and exactly where it fits into the whole. You've provided a "box" for your inspiration, so your inspiration understands what's wanted of it and supplies it. Semester after semester students tell me how surprisingly easy writing the script was after they had completed a good step outline. Recall the words of Moss Hart: "When an idea is sound, it writes easily." Step outlining is just coming up with a sound idea for every single scene you're going to write. And since you're deciding them in advance, part of the soundness of your idea for the scene will be that it fits in with all the other scenes you're inventing and adds up to a unified three-act structure.

A STEP OUTLINE IS A MAP

Holding something as complex as an entire dramatic narrative in your head all at once is hard.

It helps to have a map or model that you can scan at a glance and thereby situate yourself: "You are here." This helps in a thousand ways: knowing what you've already done, knowing what you still have to do, and seeing what's missing and what's superfluous. Mapping out your structure enables you to hold the whole script in your head at once. If you reduce every scene to a single line, you can fit your whole plot onto one or two pieces of paper (single-spaced). Once you've done that, you have your map. You can look at that page and see your whole story at a glance. The map lets you take in the overall structure all at once and thereby

know if your route is right and not a pointless detour. It lets you see each scene in the context of the scene before it and the scene after it, so you know there's flow and linearity—a logical progression. You see how the pieces fit together.

A full-length dramatic narrative is a big, complex, and, until tamed, ungainly apparatus. It's hard to hold the whole thing in your head at once, yet you must do that in order to be in control of it. Don't kid yourself; you *must* be in control of it. So the step outline is a tool for being able to see—and therefore shape—your story as a whole. The step outline puts you in charge. It enables you to see how the pieces of this complex mechanism that you're constructing fit together.

HOW MANY STEPS?

As I said, the step outline will add up to maybe a page or two, containing between thirty-five and eighty scenes, depending on what type of story it is. Thirty-five scenes are rather few, but that may be enough (though probably not) if it's a "realistically" paced character piece with long scenes that explore character in depth. If it's a complicated adventure or thriller (such as *Casablanca*), with lots of intrigue and information, eighty steps or even more could be right.

OUTLINING MEANS LESS REWRITING AND LESS WASTED EFFORT

Writing an outline in advance will save you much rewriting in the end. Why? Because step outlining leads to a first draft with a more or less solid structure, which can be revised and improved fairly easily. A script that is not planned often has a fatally flawed structure that will never be good no matter how many times you rewrite it—though sadly, very often writers try and try, tweaking and polishing something that is essentially hopeless. A script with a fatally flawed structure can be saved only with the dreaded "page-one rewrite" (everything rewritten from the first page), which I think is as hard or harder than starting something new.

With a step outline you won't have scenes that are irrelevant to the overall structure—destined to be tossed—because you

won't write them in the first place. The step outline will demonstrate that the scene is unnecessary, so you'll cut the step before you've written the scene. This is great, because once you've struggled over a scene with great lines and wonderful moments, you'll be loath to cut it even if it's stopping the story. It's darling, and you don't want to kill it. By not writing that unnecessary scene in the first place you avoid the temptation to hold onto scenes that may be splendidly written but nevertheless damage the script as a whole.

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

"Writer's block" is shockingly often simply a matter of not knowing what to write next. That's the moment that stops you cold—the moment where you don't know what the next scene is about. But if you've outlined your script in advance you're almost never in that position: the next step is decided.

A screenwriter character in Christopher Isherwood's novel *Prater Violet* complains, "They torture us, and we have nothing to confess." Plan your confession before the inquisition begins.

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT A STEP OUTLINE

Have I convinced you that a step outline is the way to go? If not, here again are the reasons. A step outline:

- Prevents "writer's block."
- Saves work. It enables you to determine before you write which scenes are crucial and which scenes can and therefore should be cut. Also, if you stick to your outline, you won't wander off onto tangents or make wrong turns that take you in fruitless directions (and necessitate massive rewrites).
- Helps you hold the organic whole in your head all at once and think in terms of overall shape. When you're in the midst of writing a scene, it's easy to get that "I can't see the forest for the trees" feeling. The step outline lets you see the shape of the forest so that you won't get lost.

- Saves time because you're not constantly stopping to decide what should happen next. You have your structure settled so you can write with a flow and a rhythm. The thing that stalls us when we're writing is not usually how to do something but what to do next. With a step outline your next move is decided in advance, so you segue easily into the next scene.
- Gives you more confidence when you write your first draft. You know that you have somewhere to go. You know that you have at least one way to skin the cat.
- Makes you create stronger, more unified scenes by forcing you to boil each scene down to one dramatic thrust. Writing a step outline makes you focus on the dramatic essence of the scene.

A STEP OUTLINE RATCHETS THE STORY FORWARD

Hitchcock said in *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, "Sequences can never stand still; they must carry the action forward, just as the wheels of a ratchet mountain railway move the train up the slope, cog by cog." A film plot ratchets forward, step by step, click, click, click. The click is the resolution of each conflict—the new state of affairs that exists at the end of the scene. It's called a step outline because that name reflects the way a dramatic narrative ratchets ever forward, never backward. Plot advances.

A STEP IS A SCENE IS A CONFLICT IS A BEAT IS A MOVEMENT IS A TURNING POINT IS A LOCATION

A step outline is a list of steps.

But what is a step? Why, it's a scene, of course! The basic building block of a plot is the scene. We order those scenes so that they compose the overall dramatic shapes discussed earlier—linearity and three-act structure. We might also, perhaps more properly, call the step outline a scene list.

And now I'm really going to confuse you: a step more or less equals a scene more or less equals a conflict more or less equals

a beat more or less equals a movement in the hero's fortunes upward or downward more or less equals a turning point in the story more or less equals a new location.

Let's go through this slowly. You understand what a scene is and that the steps of the outline represent scenes. And you understand that a scene isn't really a scene without conflict, preferably a single conflict. So you see how a scene is more or less *one conflict*: a battle in the war the hero is fighting to achieve the goal.

That conflict isn't really of interest unless it has some impact (good or bad) on what's going on, so it's easy to see that a scene also needs to be a movement upward or downward in the hero's fortunes. Remember the wavy narrative line: each scene represents an up or down movement in the hero's fortunes.

Along with a change in the hero's fortunes is some change in the situation, so the scene is a *turning point*. Things are different. The hero now has to take what just happened into account. After all, if the scene doesn't change things, why is it in the script?

That leaves location. When a conflict or scene is finished, the script generally moves to a new setting (location). Suppose that a man tries to convince his wife not to divorce him while they are riding a roller coaster and fails. Now they have to settle custody of the kids, which is really a new conflict. In a movie we'd cut to a new location for a new scene. We would not try to "transition" or segue into a new topic within the same scene. The divorce issue is settled: new issue, new location. Maybe the scene where they settle custody is set in a law office or on a space station—anyplace other than the roller coaster. (Plays, in contrast, often have a single set, so it is necessary to create graceful transitions from one topic/conflict/issue to another in the same location—trickier but doable.)

A BEAT

A beat is just a loose Hollywood word for anything that you add to a plot. Different people have different definitions. It might refer to the conflict at the center of a scene (like the term "step") but is also used for a moment within the scene, a piece of exposition, or any bit of information to do with plot. When develop-

ment executives in meetings say "beat," you can often translate it into a "step," but not always. Just keep in mind that not everyone has the same definition. Some people consider every little thing that happens within the scene a beat, so that a scene of conflict will contain several beats. If you were to list these in an outline (or a "beat sheet") the beats could run to 200 or more. That seems to me unwieldy, which therefore defeats one of the main purposes of the step outline: to put the entire narrative into a form that you can understand at a glance.

HOW DO I WRITE A STEP?

So how do you compose a single step for your step outline?

It is most effective to reduce your scene to a single sentence if possible or at most two. You are looking for the dramatic essence of the scene, the irreducible minimum that the scene must accomplish: the action of the scene, including hero, goal, conflict or obstacle, and outcome. The sentence in the outline should encompass only the dramatic action of the scene and nothing else—no setting, no exposition (though it's slightly OK to include little parenthetical "notes to self," as long as they don't undermine the brevity or blur your focus).

The step is like a mini-spine for the scene. For example: "John persuades his wife to give him sole custody of the children." The hero is John, the goal is to get custody, the central conflict is John versus his wife, and he wins.

If he hadn't, we'd have written "fails to persuade" instead of "persuades."

WHY A SINGLE SENTENCE?

Why just a sentence and not a paragraph? After all, a lot of things happen in a scene. You could easily fill a whole paragraph or more, right?

You boil the action of the scene down to a single sentence of text for two reasons. First, because doing so forces you to decide what is most important about the scene—the unifying dramatic core (in much the same way that the spine forces you to decide what is most important in the script).

Second, doing so forces you to *exclude* what is less important. In order to construct a unified script free of boring irrelevancies you must understand what is strictly necessary and what is not. You must reduce your structure to its bones and then build it out again, like a sculptor who constructs a wire frame and packs clay onto it or a painter who needs to see the bone beneath the flesh in order to paint an arm. Reducing the conflict to a single line helps you understand the dramatic core of your scene, shorn of whims and frippery. Scenes need to be about one thing. Keeping your steps to a single sentence forces you to focus.

WRITE STEPS IN A WAY THAT IMPLIES THE CONFLICT AND THE OUTCOME

Remember that the steps should imply a conflict and the outcome of the conflict. "Jerome and Meredith discuss the trip" is not a step, because it has no conflict or resolution.

"Jerome and Meredith argue about the trip" has conflict but no resolution.

"Jerome persuades Meredith to take the trip" is a step, because it gives us characters (Jerome and Meredith), implies conflict (Jerome and Meredith arguing over the trip), and provides the outcome or resolution of the conflict (Jerome wins). A decision has been made, the situation is now different, and the plot can move forward.

HOW TO THINK UP STEPS

Let's say that you have a spine and want to turn it into a step outline.

First, always have your spine at hand. The spine is your guide. The spine dictates your overall shape. Maybe tape it to the wall in front of your desk.

Now—how do you come up with the steps? Free association? That's fine, but don't let free association lead you into making all kinds of small decisions that shouldn't precede your big ones (tails that wag the dog). Remember, dramatic writing is all about making decisions in the right order—big ones first. The

decisions that you need to make now have to do with plot incidents—scenes. It does no good to decide what spangled leotard your heroine wears for the climactic bungee-jumping contest (though feel free to make notes on it).

Try asking yourself these two questions:

What are things my hero might do in pursuit of the goal?

What are the obstacles (opposition and problems) that my hero might encounter in pursuit of the goal?

Write the answers down in any order.

Answering the first question will give you actions and strategies that the hero might employ. Answering the second will imply conflicts by giving you agencies of conflict—in other words, people and things that oppose the hero.

What Would My Hero Do Next?

Once you start constructing steps, maybe using some of the ideas generated by the list you just made, ask yourself after every scene, "What would my hero do next?"

This question acknowledges that each moment in the story is different and calls for a choice particular to it. As you travel down the story road, the landscape changes constantly. An appropriate action at one point in the journey won't be right at another. Your character usually has a rather limited range of options. Given the stringently specific state of affairs and the nature of the character, what the hero does next may seem quite inevitable to you. This is not to say that we don't want surprises—we do—but even those surprises will feel inevitable if they are right for the character and the circumstances. I think that's what some people mean when they say that characters "came to life" and decided on their own what to do in the story. So having somewhat limited choices at a given point in the narrative isn't a bad thing. It means that you've been specific, you've made the big decisions correctly, and now you're addressing, in order, the small decisions that naturally come next.

Once again, that doesn't mean you don't throw a monkey wrench into things occasionally and ricochet your story into

some new direction or territory—that's something you do want to do now and then because it keeps things interesting. But even those surprises will flow out of what's come before.

So ask yourself: What would the hero do next?

What's the next problem?

The next task?

The next fire that breaks out?

Then ask yourself, "What or who stands in the hero's way?" Answering those questions should render a dandy step.

Other Considerations in Choosing What the Scene Is About

You also want to take into account whatever exposition is needed at this point in the story. As the hero struggles with obstacles (villains, mountains) information needs to be delivered to the audience, so writers often choose conflicts that facilitate the delivery of exposition. You try to construct the conflict in a way that will ratchet the story forward while at the same time providing an opportunity to air exposition. This is particularly important in act I.

THE ROLE OF INSPIRATION IN PLOTTING

When you have an idea for a script, the part of the brain that provides inspiration (solutions) starts generating material. A lot of it is great stuff, so write it down. Snatches of dialogue, ideas for moments, clever plot twists: all of it is potentially valuable and should be kept in a safe, organized place such as a notebook or a folder. Later you can go back to those notes and use them.

Or not. Your inspiration serves you (or more precisely your story)—not vice versa. And you both serve the stern goddess Screenwriting. If the narrative pattern that you create has no place for a particular fragment of inspiration, good-bye fragment.

You might say, "What a pity that my inspiration should go to waste!" But saying that is misunderstanding the nature of inspiration: it's not a scarce resource but rather a limitless river that flows through you. There's plenty more inspiration in that river, so please waste it. Building a table would produce sawdust and

wood scraps. Would you glue them to the top of the table so that they don't "go to waste"?

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

Inspiration is essential to all creative work. While inspiration has a reputation for being fugitive, there's a wonderful way to domesticate it: pose yourself a question. When you're stuck for an invention, stop and think: what do I need? Then get very specific. "What argument does Cameron use that gets Maria to agree to date him?" "What final straw should bring Blanche and Beatrice to blows?" "How does Doris trick Elmer into standing under the anvil?" Carefully formulate the right question. Your mind will work on it as you go about your business of inventing new cocktail recipes or whatever, and the answer will come to you later. To ask the right question is to be halfway to the answer. Never fear that you lack inspiration. Never wonder if you are creative or talented. Human beings are all creative, including you. The difference between a labor lawyer and an artist isn't creativity. It's that the labor lawyer is interested in labor law.

A SETTING CAN INSPIRE AN IDEA FOR A SCENE

I've been rather dogmatic in insisting that conflict is more important than setting and that the writer therefore must think of conflict first. Nevertheless, sometimes setting can help inspire an idea for what conflict should happen next in your script. The question "What would my hero do next?" can be augmented with the question "Where does my hero *go* next?" The location might suggest an obstacle or opponent. For example, in scene A the detective might discover that the suspect works in a nightclub as a disc jockey. Perhaps in scene B the detective will find conflict and obstacles there: the waitress girlfriend who bolsters the shaky alibi that she's providing or the bouncer who shows the detective "what happens to nosy people."

REUSE WHAT'S ALREADY IN THE SCRIPT

As you invent new scenes of conflict, keep in mind that you have things already in your script—characters, objects, situations,

locations—that can return, automatically creating a sort of unity and integration.

Here's a wonderful example from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. In order to persuade the foreign spies that Eva Marie Saint is on their side, the American spies stage a public scene in which Eva Marie shoots Cary Grant dead—only the gun is loaded with blank cartridges. It's a fake shooting to convince the foreign spies of her loyalty to them. Much, much later in the film Cary is prevented from rescuing Eva Marie when another spy holds him captive—until Cary realizes that it's "that same, silly gun." Bringing back that pistol loaded with blanks is a very clever way of getting Grant out of a seemingly impossible fix while at the same time giving the film unity by tying the ending to the middle. So as you invent your step consider returning to things that are already in the story.

OBSTACLES IN ACTION MOVIES

Creating a conflict is as simple as asking yourself what the hero wants and what opposes that objective. My hero wants the plans to the secret weapon. What stands between him and the plans? Mountains? Flying monkeys? Alarms? All those obstacles are potential conflicts. The most important obstacle of all in an action movie is a strong villain who will stop at nothing to get what she wants. A powerful, resourceful, ruthless villain will supply all the action you need. You don't want the villain who says, "I want the McGuffins, but I wouldn't want to cause anyone any bother." You want the villain who says, "I'll blow up the whole state of Nevada to get those McGuffins."

WHAT IS AN OBLIGATORY SCENE?

In general the obligatory scene is a scene that the audience expects. That often means the final confrontation between hero and villain, but it can also mean any scene that, if missing, would leave the audience feeling cheated. Most stories have certain key battles that decide the course of events. Should you step between the key battles? Or should you choose to play them out?

And yet some films intentionally deny the audience a seem-

ingly obligatory moment. John Ford's *Stagecoach*, considered the greatest western ever made, provides an intriguing example. Throughout the film the Ringo Kid's gunfight with the Plummers, the men who killed his brother, is structurally pointed to. Yet when the gunfight comes at last Ford cuts away before it's resolved. He makes us wait for the news of the outcome along with Ringo's fiancée Dallas, so that we'll find out that her lover is alive when she does and can share her relief. In other words, Ford gives us only half of the obligatory scene—the gunfight—but sacrifices the second half of it in order to heighten a subsequent scene.

CHOOSING THE STEP

So you've come up with an idea for a step, but how can you tell whether it's good? Ask yourself: Is it a turning point? Is this a key moment? Is this a scene that makes a difference?

Does the step drive the story forward? Does it change the situation in such a way that the hero has to respond? Is it a change in fortune?

Could the story do without it? Is it really necessary? If it weren't in the plot, would Aristotle squawk?

Through what conflict is the step accomplished? No conflict means not much of a step.

Is it *one* conflict?

STEPS THAT STICK TO THE SPINE

Be sure that your step outline sticks to your spine. How do you know if it's doing so? Look at the spinal issues and see if they appear in the steps. Your story has a hero. If the scene contains the hero, that's an indication that it's on the spine. Your hero has a goal. If the step has to do with the hero's effort to achieve that goal, that's sticking to your spine. The central conflict is with someone or something. If the scene is played between the hero and the primary opponent or feeds into their conflict, you're on the spine. The central question and the hook should also be in play throughout. Not all your steps will fulfill all these requirements, but all should fulfill at least one or two.

DON'T WORRY WHAT DAY OF THE WEEK IT IS

As you construct your step outline, don't make the common mistake of getting all tangled up in wondering what day of the week it is and whether this happens on Thursday afternoon or Saturday morning. Audiences aren't busy thinking, "Now, is this Thursday afternoon or Saturday morning?" They're busy thinking, "Oh my God, will he be caught by the evil Nazi spy?" Movie time is more like dream time than waking time: worry first about what incidents your plot needs and in what order it needs them. Sort out the story's relationship with real time later, if at all.

TAKE A WHACK AT WRITING A STEP OUTLINE NOW

Now would be a good time to write a step outline, because the next section is going to tell you how to rewrite it.

Make sure that your steps are brief, preferably a single sentence, and single-space them (to take them in at a glance). And feel free to use your word-processing software's numbering function.

REWRITE IT

No one's first draft step outline is perfect. In fact, there's no such thing as a perfect step outline, so don't worry if yours isn't. Once you've written your step outline, you'll almost certainly have to rewrite it to make sure it really is a list of writable scenes of conflict.

This section of the chapter teaches you how to inspect your first draft step outline, identify the usual errors, and fix them. You'll probably discover that the main problem with first draft step outlines is that the steps aren't scenes of conflict.

Fixing Steps That Aren't Conflicts

You want your step outline to be a list of conflicts. Conflicts hold the audience's interest and make scenes easy to write.

When you start constructing your step outline, however, you will be inclined to think in terms of expository information and emotion rather than conflict. That's natural and just means that

you'll have to adjust your steps so that they do describe a conflict. Let me give you some examples—first-draft steps that a writer might typically create.

Bob is a good husband.

Bob suspects that his wife is cheating on him.

Bob discovers that his wife is indeed cheating.

Bob feels very sad.

Bob confronts his wife.

Bob and his wife discuss child custody.

This is a perfectly logical series of events and indeed even implies a chain of causality, with one scene leading to the next. But it is not yet a list of scenes of conflict. It's a list of expository information that will be conveyed within scenes of conflict. Big difference.

Let's look at what's wrong with the aforementioned steps and see if they can be improved.

An Emotion Is Not a Step

Sometimes the expository information is how the character feels at a given moment (the hero's internal state): verbs such as "suspects," "feels," and "decides" describe internal processes and states. But an internal state is not a dramatic scene because it's not a conflict. For the emotion to be conveyed dramatically, you have to show us the scene of conflict that causes the emotion or results from the emotion.

Just to feel an emotion is not a scene. "Bob feels sad" is of no help to a writer sitting in front of a blank page. "Bob feels sad" is the kind of step that leads a writer to ideas like this: "Bob walks on the beach, looking sad and lonely in his oatmeal-colored fisherman's knit sweater. He picks up a seashell and gazes wistfully at the horizon." No matter how you dress it up, that's a screaming bore—and what's worse for you, it's only two lines of writing. Only a hundred pages to go.

And don't fool yourself by saying, "It's so visual, there isn't even a line of dialogue." Your job now is not thinking up visual images, it's making up scenes of conflict.

No. You need to do something with Bob's sadness that gives

you something to write. You need to explore Bob's sadness in a way that gets the story up on its feet. Instead of "Bob feels sad," you need a scene of conflict that flows out of his sadness. Here are some suggestions:

Bob's bartender tries to convince him to stop drinking so much.

Bob's mother tries to persuade him that his mood is affecting his children.

The police talk Bob down off a high ledge.

Whether you like these steps or not, they're writable. You could generate three pages on any one of them. If you've selected territory that you know and understand (maybe you patronize a colorful barkeep who'd make a great model for that character or maybe you've been talked down from a ledge yourself—heaven knows I've been talked down from a few), they may well be three pages that rock.

In any case the step needs conflict, not just emotion.

Expository Information Is Not a Step

Let's examine another mistake in step construction: proposing as a step something that is simply a piece of exposition. Take, for example, "Show Bob is a good husband." When you say "show," you mean "expose." That means exposition, which should never be the whole point of a scene. Exposition is something that happens along the way as a result of conflict. Find the conflict and the exposition will follow. Exposition flows out of conflict.

If you don't understand the need for conflict, you might be tempted to "Show Bob is a good husband" with a scene in which Bob brings his wife flowers.

"Here, honey, posies!"

"That's nice, darling. I'll put them in water."

What a nice husband. What a dull scene. Could "showing" that "Bob is a good husband" be done with a scene of conflict? Of course. How about this step:

Bob's boss can't convince him to accept a transfer that would disrupt his family.

Such a scene would show that Bob values his married life because it makes him choose between his home life and something else that he values. He has to fight for that choice (the boss really wants him to go) and maybe make sacrifices in the service of that choice (the boss isn't happy when Bob refuses, and Bob doesn't get a raise).

Conflict Makes You Invent

Notice how the duty of being forced to create conflict gives you something that you can work with later in the story. When Bob's wife leaves him, he'll have even less time for his demanding job and his annoyed boss because he'll have to deal with child-care issues. Maybe he'll have further conflicts down the road when he has to choose between a meeting with a client and attending his daughter's school play.

Inventing Opposition

Sometimes to create conflict you have to invent opposition. Say you're writing a personal story, maybe based on what happened when your dog ran away. You were sad, with no conflict around your sadness. You just moped about the house and one day decided that you'd better get your act together. The journey of deciding to get your act together happened inside your head where the audience can't see it. Internal action is fine in a novel, but in a movie you have to externalize the conflict. You invent opposition. For example, invent a first grade teacher who decides to find out why the hero is acting out in school. The teacher coaxes the hero into realizing that loss is a natural part of life and that you can't let it stop you. You've just invented opposition. As a bonus, the elements that conflict forced you to invent (obstacles, opponents, situations) will come in handy later in the story.

Verboten *Verbs*

A key to evaluating the "writability" of your step is the verb. Some verbs imply internal states: "wants," "suspects," "believes," "thinks," "feels," "is." These verbs tell us what the hero feels or

thinks in the proposed scene, but not what the character *does*. A step with these verbs doesn't help you come up with something to write. Such verbs are clues that your step needs conflict.

Other verbs imply exposition—character traits, states of affairs, revelations: "show," "reveal," "learn," "discover," "discuss," "get a concussion," "get laid," "go to the dance," "have a party."

The verb "show" misleads the writer into scenes that "cleverly" display or illustrate exposition instead of scenes of conflict. Clever or not, displaying or illustrating exposition tends to be dramatically inert.

"Discuss" is the most disastrous verb of all. It means that the writer thinks the scene should be a yakfest in which a laundry list of expositional information is slipped in as the characters sit around, probably coming to no conclusion at all but along the way providing a much too easy opportunity for the writer to get information across to the audience while imagining that she's doing the job of dramatizing the material. So how is a step that uses the verb "discuss" to be improved?

"Persuade" Is the Best Verb

"Persuade" is a great verb for steps. Instead of having characters "discuss" the situation, create a step in which a character persuades (or fails to persuade) another character to think something or do something.

Jettison the step that says "Bugsy and the gang discuss the bank robbery" and instead choose "Bugsy persuades the gang to go along with his plan." See how that step can have thrust, drama, and a beginning, middle, and end in a way the "discussion" doesn't? "Persuade" is the verb used so often in a good step outline because scenes of conflict are so often about persuasion. The hero persuades the woman to go to bed with him, persuades someone to go along with his plan, or persuades the villain to put down his gun. Shakespeare is all about persuasion. Hamlet tries to persuade Ophelia to go away, Gertrude tries to persuade Hamlet to make nice with his stepfather, and Polonius tries to persuade Laertes to be a good boy on his trip.

Of course, they may try to persuade and fail. "Mom fails to

persuade Bugsy not to rob the bank." (By the way, the verb "convince" currently is used more or less interchangeably with "persuade," and that's fine, but I was taught a distinction: you *convince* someone of a belief but you *persuade* someone to take an action.)

Emotion and Exposition

When you see expository information or an emotion in a step but no dramatic action, you know you have to add conflict. But how?

Start by asking yourself, "Does this emotion or piece of exposition begin the scene? Or is it what concludes the scene?" In other words, does the scene of conflict *result* from the emotion or exposition, or *produce* the emotion or exposition?

For example, if you've written, "The spy reveals the location of the uranium," that's exposition. Probably it's a revelation that ends the scene. So ask yourself, "What conflict leads to this end?" Maybe the step should be "Dr. Sin tortures the spy until he reveals the location of the uranium." Presto change-o, a scene of conflict with a resolution.

Maybe you've written "Quanie is happy to get the job offer." "Happy" is just an emotion; the boss offers the job, she smiles, scene over. Not much grist for the old scene-writing mill, eh?

But suppose that we view Quanie's happiness about the job news as the beginning of a scene: the "incitement" that sets off the conflict that will be the meat of the scene. For example, "Quanie persuades her husband to let her take the new job." This requires you to invent opposition, in this case the husband. That's easily done. Maybe the job really is right for her, but he doesn't see that right away and has to be persuaded to go along.

Don't tell us what the characters feel or think—tell us what they do.

Rewriting the Steps on Bob's Journey

Let's revisit the first steps that we wrote for the story of Bob. They were typical first stabs at steps but weren't really writable because they focused on emotions or pieces of exposition rather than dramatizable conflicts. They didn't provide the dramatist

with the conflict that inspires a lively, playable, easy-to-write scene. Let's replace the pseudo-steps with steps that have conflict.

Bob is a good husband. Demonstrations are dramatically inert. A better alternative is *Bob's boss can't persuade him to accept a transfer that would disrupt his family*.

Bob suspects that his wife is cheating on him. "Suspecting" is a solitary internal activity and needs to be brought out into the observable world of conflict. Make it either the incitement for or the result of conflict. Perhaps the scene begins with the seed of suspicion and conflict: *Bob fails to persuade his wife to give him a convincing explanation of why she was out all night.*

Bob discovers that his wife is indeed cheating. How about making that discovery the resolution of the scene*: Bob tails his wife to the motel where she meets her lover*. You might see no conflict here, but this step indeed involves a clash of wills. Bob wants to discover what his wife is up to, she wants to hide it, and she's actively expressing her will to hide the affair by sneaking around to the motel.

Bob feels very sad. Obviously sadness is just an emotion. The purpose of this step from an exposition point of view is to air Bob's feelings, so perhaps we begin the scene with Bob already sad (after all, he just discovered that his wife is cheating on him) and have somebody try to jolly him out of it. Maybe his brother never liked the wife: *Bob's brother fails to convince him that his wife is not worth crying over and he should just move on.*

Bob confronts his wife. That sounds like a scene of conflict, but it's really just a discussion with yelling, because it lacks a goal. Try this: *Bob tries to convince his wife that he can never love her again—her betrayal is unforgivable.*

Bob and his wife discuss child custody. Another discussion. Better: *Bob's wife persuades him that he has no chance of getting full custody*.

Notice how much easier it is to write the revised steps. Does that mean that your time was wasted in your first draft of the step outline? Absolutely not! Those emotions and bits of expo-

sition were valuable. They pointed you toward the conflicts that will flesh out your story.

Don't Break What's Really One Step into Several Steps

One more mistake that people quite often make in the first draft step outline is to break what's really a single step into several steps. For example:

Mabel persuades her father that she wants him to stay home.
He persuades her he wants to go to Ibiza.
She persuades him that his Alzheimer's is getting worse.
Father persuades Mabel that he doesn't care.
She persuades him that they can't afford the trip.
He persuades her that he's walking out the door anyway.

Wow! You've just written six steps, right?

Uh, no. You've written one step and broken it down into six . . . well, I suppose they're beats within the scene.

The step is this: Mabel fails to persuade her father to stay home.

Here's a clue to diagnosing this problem. Did those six beats disguised as steps all take place in one location? Of course they did. Very often a step equals a scene equals a location. Not always, but often.

A Moment Is Not a Step

Screenplays are made up of scenes of conflict. Practically, however, we use bits of film to connect those scenes. Occasionally those bits will not have conflict because they're not worth the time it would take to develop conflict. For example, in "establishing shots" you show characters walking up to a location in order to establish that location. Or you might show a woman dropping into a mailbox an important letter that she agonized over sending. It's just a shot, but it's important enough to mention in the step outline. Or you might show people driving from one place to another. I call these little moments between scenes that establish facts of the situation "connective tissue." They serve as a kind of mortar between the bricks (the scenes of conflict). This

connective tissue isn't usually a scene of conflict. It's material that we want to get out of the way quickly. The material is necessary but maybe doesn't deserve the space required to develop conflict. Sometimes I leave this kind of stuff out when I outline, adding it only during the actual writing of the script, but you may want to include it. That's fine.

AN EXERCISE

I don't much like exercises and for the most part don't assign them. But I think that this exercise is fun. I call it Fleshing the Bones. Together, as a class, we come up with an idea and create a spine for it.

Then we come up with a step outline for the first act—say five or six steps. We choose a couple of scenes that sound like fun and have volunteers from the class improvise them. Some of the students have studied acting; others have never acted in their lives but do just fine. If their improvisations are lame, that's OK too: it turns into a scene of comedy (comedy is so often about ineptitude).

The scenes that we improvise often turn out to be pretty good. Moments are funny or emotional, and the business of playing out conflict to a resolution gets done.

Of course, improvising a scene is in a very real sense writing it. We're improvising the scenes in real time, obviously, so they're maybe three or four minutes long. In two or three minutes on our feet we've improvised two or three pages of script. Who says that writing has to take a long time? (OK, I usually give the performers five or ten minutes in the hallway to talk through the scene, but still.) So what do we get from this? First, we learn that writing scenes needn't take as long as you think. In the course of maybe an hour or two we have come up with a spine, step-outlined a first act, and "written" a couple of scenes. And the students see that once you have formulated a step that really is a scene of conflict, making up the scene itself is child's play.

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

Fleshing the Bones is just an exercise, which means that the students forget to invest it with fear, desire, and need. Consequently they approach it with an uncritical sense of play that lets them create a lot of material quickly. They see that writing can be painless if you don't burden it with a lot of agonizing about whether it's going to be good, get produced, or receive an "A." I'm not saying don't think, don't rewrite, and don't come up with several approaches and pick the best one. Do all those things, but remember that we engage in creativity because it's fun. Stay loose. Dramatic writing is a form of structured play, like soccer or Scrabble. When the class creates something together, nobody's ego is on the line. That lack of ego gives the process a freedom that comes from having nothing to lose. With the right mental attitude, the screenwriting that you do on your own can have some of that same quality and therefore come more easily. When you're writing your own screenplay, you tend to think of your script as "you" and fear that people are rejecting you as a person if they don't like your script. Well, your script isn't you. It's something that you construct, outside yourself, and some people aren't going to like it. Their not liking it doesn't mean it's bad and certainly doesn't mean that *you're* bad.

THE STEP OUTLINE CAN BE CHANGED ONCE YOU START WRITING

The step outline is not set in stone. You may revise it at any point in the process, including after the actual writing of scenes has begun. I encourage that. As you make your way through the scenes and get to know your characters better you may be inspired with better steps. Write scenes based on those new steps but simultaneously update your step outline. Your step outline should at all times reflect what you've actually written so far and the scenes you actually intend to write. Think of the script as a forest: before you entered the forest you sketched out a map, but once you got into the forest you hit a boulder that you didn't expect and had to alter your route. Naturally, you revise your map

of the forest to reflect the altered route. So keep your step outline updated as you move through the forest. It helps you keep the overall shape of the forest in mind.

For me the urge to revise my step outline typically hits about halfway through writing my first draft, at which point I say, "Hey, the second half of this step outline stinks. I'm going to rewrite it before I go any further."

DON'T FORGET TO LIE

The step outline offers lots of room for creativity and invention. Some students misunderstand my emphasis on writing what they know and think that they can't make up anything that isn't literally true—anything that didn't happen. Yikes, no! What you make up probably should be true to what you know about life, but very often we have to make up things to get the story started and keep it rolling. Most of all, we make up conflicts. In life people often avoid conflict. In drama sometimes it's necessary to shoot your enemy dead on the steps of the chateau instead of snubbing her at the supermarket.

WHAT IF YOU GET STALLED IN WRITING YOUR SCENES?

Say that you've finished your outline and started writing scenes. You're whooshing along. It feels so easy. You relish starting each writing session confidently knowing what happens next. Not knowing what comes next daunts a writer, which is why Ernest Hemingway always tried to end his writing day when he still had more to write and knew there was something to start the next day with. Your step outline is the equivalent of that, so you're fine. Then one day—bam! A wall. The next step on the list won't write as a scene. OK—now what? Sagely nod, mutter "writer's block," and pour another absinthe?

Look at your offending step and ask four questions:

Is the step I'm trying to write really needed? Sometimes you can't get started writing a step because the step really shouldn't be there—it's unnecessary. Eliminate the step and move on.

Is another step needed as a bridge to the step that I'm trying to

write? One of the tricky things about plotting is placing the stepping stones of plot—the scenes—just so. You sometimes want to leave some gap between steps for the audience to fill in with little leaps of imagination, but the steps can't be too far apart or the audience will have to make uncomfortably large leaps. If the stepping stones are too far apart and one scene doesn't seem to flow naturally from the other, the audience has a feeling that something is missing: that's what some call "lurching conflict." Insert an intermediate step.

Is the step I've written lousy? Maybe it's just a bad step: undramatic, boring or, most often, lacking conflict. In that case rewrite the step.

Is my spine right? If you find that the step outline just won't write at all, the problem can probably be traced back to the spine. Go back to your spine and make sure it's right.

THE STEP OUTLINE AT A GLANCE

As I've said earlier, "writer's block" is a romanticized term for "not writing." Writers don't write for two reasons: (1) "I'm scared that my writing will be bad" and (2) "I don't know what to write."

The first problem is solved by forgetting the outcome and seeing writing as an activity that you do to express love for yourself (I know, easier said than done).

The second reason for blockage is best solved by constructing a step outline. It's your strongest weapon in the fight against writer's block. The outline is your lifeline. It isn't sacrosanct (it can be infinitely adjusted and changed as you go), but with it by your side you never have to feel that you don't know what to write next. Just write the next scene on the list. The scene will write if it's really a step—a character who wants something and engages in a conflict or struggle against an obstacle to get it. The step is like a little spine: hero, goal, something or someone that opposes the hero, and winning or losing. Don't just jot down an item of exposition or an emotion and think that you're done with the step, because that kind of step will be no help when it comes time to write. Go the extra distance and turn it into a conflict.

Step outlines aren't perfect and aren't set in stone—they

evolve as you write—but if you clutch yours tightly the dreaded writer's block will be vanquished.

Good steps

- move the story forward with conflict;
- provide an opportunity for exposition to emerge;
- flow from one to the other; and
- add up to a three-act structure.

Still confused about step outlining? Watch *Casablanca* with the following step outline beside you for a better understanding of the relationship between a step and the finished scene.

CASABLANCA STEP OUTLINE

ACT I: Voice-over narrator persuades audience that Casablanca is a center of exotic intrigue and desperate refugees who all want out.

A radio operator persuades all officers that the stolen documents must be recovered.

Cops persuade the populace of Casablanca that expired papers mean jail or death.

A pickpocket persuades tourists that Casablanca is a dangerous town.

Captain Renault persuades Major Strasser that the document thieves will be arrested tonight at Rick's.

A customer fails to persuade the waiter Carl to get the mysterious Rick to sit with him.

The doorman and Rick persuade a German jerk that he's not welcome in the back room.

Ugarte persuades Rick to hide the letters of transit for him.

Rick persuades Ugarte to sort of admit that he murdered the couriers.

Rick hides the letters as Sam distracts the audience.

Ferrari can't persuade Rick to sell the café or Sam's services as an entertainer.

Yvonne can't persuade Rick to pay attention to her.

Rick persuades the bartender to escort the drunken Yvonne home.

Captain Renault can't persuade Rick to reveal his past.
Rick persuades the croupier that it's OK he ran out of money.
Renault persuades Rick not to interfere with tonight's arrest.
Renault bets Rick that the Nazis will stop Victor from escaping Casablanca.
Renault persuades Strasser that the arrest will succeed.
Ugarte fails to escape the cops and fails to get Rick to help.
Strasser fails to persuade Rick to admit that he's against the Third Reich and that the Reich can stop Victor in Casablanca.

ACT II: Ilsa fails to persuade Victor to leave Rick's immediately.
The freedom fighter Berger persuades Victor that he's with the underground.
Renault softens up Victor and Ilsa with charm.
Strasser persuades Victor to submit to questioning tomorrow morning.
Berger informs Victor that Ugarte is under arrest.
Ilsa can't persuade Sam to dish about Rick but persuades him to play "As Time Goes By," alerting Rick to her presence.
Over drinks Renault tries to decipher the subtext among Rick, Victor, and Ilsa.
Victor fails to persuade Ilsa to tell him about Rick.
Sam can't persuade Rick to forget Ilsa and lay off the sauce.
(Flashback) Rick can't persuade Ilsa to reveal her past.
Rick persuades Ilsa to reveal her past: a lover who has died.
Rick persuades Ilsa to guzzle champagne so the Germans won't get it.
Rick can't persuade Ilsa to marry immediately.
Ilsa's note persuades Rick that she's not coming.
Sam persuades Rick to get on the train (end flashback).
Ilsa can't persuade Rick to understand why she left him and that she isn't the lying slut he thinks she is.
Strasser can't persuade Renault that Rick has the stolen letters of transit.
Strasser can't persuade Victor to rat out the underground.
Ferrari can't persuade Rick to sell the letters of transit.

Rick can't persuade Ilsa that he's irresistible (her counterargument is the news that she's Victor's wife and was even when she was with Rick in Paris).
Ferrari can't persuade Ilsa to accept a single visa.
Victor can't persuade Ilsa to leave without him.
Ferrari persuades Victor and Ilsa that Rick might have the letters.
Carl can't persuade Rick to stop drowning his sorrows.
Renault can't persuade Rick to admit that he has the letters.
Rick persuades French and Nazi soldiers not to brawl in his place.
Strasser persuades Renault that he won't tolerate Victor's troublemaking.
Carl's friends fail to persuade him that they're ready for America.
A Bulgarian bride persuades Rick to tell her whether Renault can be trusted to exchange exit visas for sex.
Rick rigs the roulette table so that the Bulgarian bride's husband wins enough for exit visas and bride is spared sleeping with Renault.
The grateful Bulgarian bride can't persuade Rick to kiss her.
Rick persuades the bartender to stop kissing him.
Renault persuades Rick to stop derailing his "romances."
Victor can't persuade Rick to sell the letters and tells him: "Ask your wife."
Victor persuades the orchestra to play "La Marseillaise" to drown out the Germans' singing.
Strasser persuades Renault to close Rick's (but Renault accepts his winnings).
Strasser persuades Ilsa that he means business.
Victor persuades Ilsa that he loves, trusts, and understands her.
Ilsa, armed, can't persuade Rick to give her the letters—but he persuades her to embrace.
Ilsa persuades Rick that she had good reason to jilt him at the train station because Victor was alive and sick, so now

Rick should help Victor to get out of town and then make all the decisions.

Victor shows up, so Rick smuggles Ilsa out the back way.

Victor persuades Rick that he should use the letters of transit to save Ilsa by running off with her.

The police arrest Victor.

ACT III: Rick persuades Renault to release Victor to entrap him later.

Rick persuades Ferrari that he's getting a bargain buying Rick's café.

Rick (armed) persuades Renault not to arrest Victor after all.

Renault fools Rick into thinking that he's calling the airport but alerts Major Strasser.

Rick persuades Ilsa to get on the plane with Victor.

Rick persuades Victor that he and Ilsa are history and that Victor shouldn't worry.

Renault persuades Rick that Ilsa knew he was lying.

Rick persuades Strasser not to call the radio tower, by killing him.

Renault persuades his men to round up "the usual suspects."

Renault persuades Rick that they should both join the nearby Free French garrison.

FORMAT

The novelist Susan Isaacs, who wrote the screen adaptation of her bestselling *Compromising Positions*, many years ago advised me, "Any nine-year-old can learn to format a screenplay in twenty minutes."

That said, beginners often manage to get it wrong. Probably they think: "Formatting isn't important because it's not the interesting and artistic part, like character and dialogue."

Oh, baby, how formatting matters.

PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE

Terrible scripts somehow get agents and make the rounds. Some are so appalling that it's hard to believe, but they have one thing in common with all the other scripts making the rounds: they're neat and well-formatted. "Hollywood is exactly like high school. With money!" Tom Hanks said in a BBC interview by Tim Masters. And you signal that you're one of the cool kids with a script that's indistinguishable in format from every other script on a producer's teetering pile of reading. Any script that looks not quite right goes to the bottom of the pile—and the bottom of the pile is never reached.

The physicality of the script shouldn't stand out; it should blend in. What should stand out is your unique voice. This reality may seem antiartistic ("My creativity needs to be free—free, I tell you—free!") but in fact standard formatting is perfectly capable of containing the wildest cinematic experimentation.

GOOD FORMAT IS PART OF GOOD WRITING

The rules of screenwriting have come into being because they have served writers and directors well. Generations of film writers have experimented with screenwriting and come up with a way of doing things that works. There's a logic to it. For one thing standardized format allows you to compare the script with other scripts. Are the speeches long or short? What will the running time of the picture be? What's the proportion of action to talk? Any experienced reader of scripts can thumb through one for ten seconds and make those judgments, and that's a good thing—it saves people time so that they can read more scripts. Standardization in format is good for you too: it enables your script to look every bit as professional as the script of someone who's an established screenwriter with a six-figure fee. What's more, proper formatting translates into a document that gives your collaborators what they need from you. So, even when confronted with customs of formatting that seem to make no sense, just submit.

THE SPEC SCRIPT

Perhaps you've seen published versions of scripts that deviate from standard formatting. Or perhaps you've even seen shooting scripts that include scene numbers and the words "continued" at the tops and bottoms of the pages. It's hard for civilians to get hold of the kind of script you're writing—a spec script. That means a script written on speculation by the writer who's executing a personal idea not on assignment but rather as something that the writer wholly owns. You're learning the formatting for a spec script. It's easier to write than a shooting script and the right thing to do in the bargain. Even if you plan to use screenwriting software (I mention some at the end of the chapter), learn about formatting so that you have an understanding of what to ask of the software.

Paper

Three-hole punched, not two-hole. Normal white paper of the sort that they don't charge extra for at the photocopy store, which is white 20 lb. bond. Fancy paper looks silly.

Typeface

Courier New or Courier 12 point. This font looks like an old-fashioned typewriter font. It's not supposed to look fancy or "produced" or published.

Nothing is boldfaced, even on the title page. Nothing is italicized (though that rule may be changing). Traditionally, underlining for emphasis may be employed (very sparingly).

Margins

Your left page margin should be 1.5 inches, while your right margin should be an inch, but half an inch is OK if you're trying to shrink the page count and 1.25 is OK if you're trying to stretch it.

The margins at the top and bottom of the page are 1 inch.

Don't indent slug lines or descriptions.

All margins are flush left, ragged right. Do not right-justify.

Three Parts to Formatting

Screenplay formatting has three parts.

The *slug line* (or heading or master scene heading) comes at the beginning of every scene (every time there's a new location). It tells us generally where we are and whether it's day or night.

The *description* "describes" actions of the characters and anything else that needs to be explained. It's usually visual information or sound effects. "Bob pushes the plunger and the bomb goes KA-BLAM."

The *dialogue* is what characters say.

SLUG LINES

Slug lines are not indented. They begin at the left-hand page margin and may extend (when necessary) to the right-hand page margin. They are written in all capital letters.

The first element in the slug line is "INT." (if it's an interior)

or "EXT." (if it's an exterior). These are indications of whether the camera and crew will have to set up outside or inside. Almost all scenes are inside or outside.

Occasionally a scene takes place in a doorway or with people in a car on a street. In such cases "INT./EXT." is acceptable.

The second part of the slug tells us the precise location. If that location repeats in the course of the film, it should consistently be referred to in the same words. In other words, "DESIREE'S BEDROOM" remains "DESIREE'S BEDROOM" and does not change to "DESIREE'S BOUDOIR."

The location should be specific but not more specific than necessary. For example, if a scene takes place in a park but it doesn't really matter what kind of park, just leave it at "PARK" and give the location scout the freedom to pick the most picturesque (or cheapest) park location.

Notice that we don't go into any detail regarding the description of the location—the slug line isn't the place for that. If more words are needed to describe the location, do it in the description.

The third part of the slug is the time of day, with only two options: "DAY" or "NIGHT." You don't need to specify "TWILIGHT," "LATE NIGHT," "HIGH NOON," or "ABOUT THREE O'CLOCK." If a particular quality of light is needed, mention it in the description.

Slugs should be short and sweet: "INT. JOE'S BAR – DAY."

If you are unable to fit the slug on a single line, your slugs are too wordy. Elaboration should be handled below the slug, in the description.

You don't need to provide new slugs if you're shifting locations in a single room, but a new room usually requires a new slug.

If you're not sure whether you'll need a new slug, ask yourself, "Will they have to pack up and move the camera and lights?" New setup equals new location.

DREAMS, FANTASIES, AND FLASHBACKS

In the cases of dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations, and the like, it is sometimes acceptable to include a fourth part to the slug: an indication in parentheses of the scene's special nature: "INT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE – NIGHT (DESIREE'S DREAM)."

A dash before indicating the special nature of the scene instead of parentheses is also fine: "INT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE – NIGHT – DESIREE'S DREAM."

Other special notations might be the year of a flashback ("1929") or whether a scene is shot in "BLACK & WHITE."

DESCRIPTION

Description is the second major part of formatting and is contained in paragraphs of prose that stretch across the page from margin to margin. They are not indented. Skip a line between paragraphs, which will resemble the paragraphs of a business letter.

The paragraphs of description should be short—no more than four or five lines. Shorter is better. A single sentence, or even a single word, is fine.

Long blocks of description should be broken into paragraphs. Each paragraph perhaps should make a single point, which might imply (not specify) a camera shot.

"Description" doesn't mean that you are invited to describe the ornate sets, bejeweled costumes, and remarkable landscape as though you were a novelist. Movies have people for that stuff, so all you have to do is *briefly* describe what we see happen, usually the actions of the characters and sound effects:

```
INT. COFFEE SHOP – DAY

Robin, looking sleepy, pours Tori a coffee,
but Tori doesn't even look up.
```

Supply at least one brief line of description after each slug. It looks odd to jump straight from a slug to dialogue, and the line

of description gives you a chance to do something creative to start the scene strikingly.

DIALOGUE

The blocks of dialogue have three elements: the speaker's name ("character cue"), the parentheticals ("actor directions" or "wrylies," as in they say something in a "wry" way), and the speech itself (dialogue).

The block of dialogue is single-spaced so that the eye perceives it as a unit.

Do not skip a line between the speaker's name and the actual dialogue.

Indent the speaker's name twenty spaces (four tabs if your tabs are five spaces). You indent parentheticals (dialogue directions) fifteen spaces (three tabs) and the dialogue itself ten spaces (two tabs). An alternate indentation scheme indents the character names twenty-two spaces from the left-hand margin, the parentheticals sixteen spaces from the left-hand margin, and the dialogue itself ten spaces.

Let's go over formatting dialogue more slowly, starting with the name of the speaker: the person speaking the speech (even if it's only one word long we call it a speech).

Indent four tabs (or twenty spaces) for the speaker's name above the speech.

This should put the speaker's name more or less in the center of the page—but don't use your word-processing program to center every name. Each name is indented the same distance from the left-hand margin. The left-hand margin for all character names should be the same. The right-hand margin will vary, because names come in varying lengths.

Next the speech itself: indent the dialogue ten spaces (two tabs if your tabs are five spaces).

The dialogue not only has its own left-hand margin but also has a narrower right-hand margin. Dialogue should run in a column down the center of the page, between three and three and a half inches wide (about as wide as your fingers without your

thumb). You can test this on the page by holding your fingers over the dialogue column, which should block out just about everything except for a few stray long words that hang over on the right.

Don't hyphenate long words at the end of the line—let them run.

Your block of dialogue will look like this:

```
                    TODD
How come I have to go to school? They
ain't teaching me nothing!
```

There you have it, a block of dialogue. There's one more element to the block of dialogue that you will need, though not very often: the parenthetical.

PARENTHETICALS

The parentheticals (also called "wrylies" or "dialogue directions") are little remarks in parentheses usually situated just below the speaker's name in the blocks of dialogue. Only two types of information are truly acceptable to include in the parentheticals: how the line is said and to whom it is directed. It's the actor's job to inflect the lines, not yours, but sometimes it's appropriate to tell an actor how a line is said ("wryly," "tearfully," "whispering," and so on).

```
                    BABAK
            (wryly)
I love having my eyes poked with
sticks. It's festive.
```

In situations with a lot of characters in the scene, it's sometimes necessary to specify to whom a line is spoken.

```
                    OFFICER ADAMS
            (to Amy)
```

You there, in the cardigan.
Did you see the perps clearly?

Remember that in 999 cases out of 1,000 it is perfectly obvious how the line should be said and to whom it is directed: to indicate this is a redundant bore.

Moreover, the actors will usually make the more interesting choice. That's their job. For example:

DR. SIN
(viciously)
I'm going to have Monkeyboy tear out your throat and eat it.

"Viciously" is a pretty obvious choice for such a line, and other ways of saying it might be more interesting. "Blandly?" "Amiably?" Leave room for the actors' creativity—they have to construct an entire arcing performance that holds together, so why trip them up with a detail?

Physical actions, "stage business," and so on belong within the descriptive passages, not in the parentheticals. Occasionally a small physical action that can be described very briefly may be contained in a parenthetical. But don't do it too often.

TALLULAH
How do you do?
(eyes narrowing)
I've met you somewhere. Oh, yes! My God, you were my lover 15 years ago!
I thought I told you . . .
(she drags on her cigarette and exhales)
. . . to wait in the car.

Notice that a parenthetical may occur again in the same block of dialogue, always occupying its own line.

Don't use the word "beat" in the parentheticals to indicate where the actor should pause. In fact, rarely should you presume to tell an actor when to pause.

Parentheticals are very useful to indicate when people interrupt, overlap, or speak simultaneously.

If a speech is in French, write the dialogue in English with a parenthetical: "in French"; if it is also subtitled write: "in French with subtitles."

```
                BRIGITTE
          (in French with subtitles)
Give me my cheese! I'm leaving!
```

Parentheticals aren't capitalized and don't end with periods.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "(O.S.)" AND "(V.O.)"

To indicate that a character is heard but not seen, place the abbreviation "O.S." in parentheses directly to the right of the character's name. "(O.S.)" stands for "offscreen" and means that the character is physically present in the scene but not seen by the camera. For example:

```
                TODD (O.S.)
What part of "occupied" don't you
understand?
```

There are good dramatic and comedic reasons why a voice might occasionally come from offscreen, but don't overuse it.

Use "(V.O.)" (voice-over) if the speaker is functioning more or less as a narrator. For example, if the audience hears what a character is thinking (a choice you'd rarely if ever make as a beginning screenwriter), use "(V.O.)."

```
                ALBERT (V.O.)
I remember the summer of 1942 as though
it were last Thursday . . .
```

You can also use a voice-over to indicate voices from public address systems, radios, and telephones.

Voice-overs are commonly used when a character is reading a letter or email: the audience sees the character reading the pages and hears the letter's writer speaking the words in voice-over.

LABEL DIALOGUE CONSISTENTLY

In the description and in character names above speeches, refer to characters consistently by the same name, usually a first name. In other words, instead of inconsistently labeling Carlos's dialogue "DR. ROSENTHAL," "CARLOS ROSENTHAL," and "CARLOS," it should always be just "CARLOS." In dialogue he may be called many things (Dr. Rosenthal, Doc, Dad—whatever), but stick with one name in the description and dialogue headings. It avoids confusion.

PHONE CONVERSATIONS

Write one side of a phone conversation like this:

```
The phone rings and Mary picks up.

                    MARY
          Hello? Yes, this is Mary Monahan. What?
          My son? What about him? What precinct?
          Yes, I'll be right there.
```

Notice the absence of pauses and ellipses. Let the actor sort it out.

If you want to show both sides of the conversation, slug both locations and provide a subheading that reads: "INTERCUT TELEPHONE CONVERSATION."

Then write the dialogue as usual and let others make the decisions in the editing room:

```
INT. SALOON - DAY

Clem leans on the jukebox and dials his cell
phone.
```

EXT. PLAYGROUND – DAY

Kitty, hanging from the monkey bars, picks up.

KITTY
Hello?

INTERCUT TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

CLEM
It's me.

KITTY
Where's the pony? It's not here.

End the phone conversation with a subheading that reads: "BACK TO SCENE." Or simply indicate that the person hangs up ("CLICK!") or slug the start of a new scene.

Skip Two Lines between Scenes (or One)
While you skip one line between most of the elements in the script, it is preferable to skip two lines between scenes. Another way to say this is that you skip two lines before every slug.

However, you may skip only one if your page count is too long or if you simply prefer it.

Capitalization
Here's what you capitalize: the SLUG LINE; the CHARACTER NAME above a speech; the CHARACTER NAME the first time it appears in the description. In other words, if a new character walks into the story, you indicate this by having the character's name capitalized to alert the casting director that there's another part to cast:

KRISTINA, 45, an impeccably groomed businesswoman, enters the café.

Suppose you mention the character in the dialogue several pages before the character physically appears on the screen. Should you write the name in all caps in the dialogue?

Never. Nothing is all caps in the dialogue.

Important props and sound effects may be all caps, but only when you want to draw attention to them:

```
Mark draws a GUN from his trench coat. BANG!
```

Subheadings

Sometimes you want to indicate a shift of scene or lapse of time within a scene but a whole new slug seems like overkill. In that case use subheadings (also called "secondary scene headings").

For example, you might indicate a lapse of time:

```
Tracy lights a cigarette.

LATER

Cigarette butts spill over the sides of the
ashtray.
```

Or suppose you want to indicate various locations within a larger location.

```
INT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT

Lilith slithers past the bouncer.

AT THE BAR

Doris notes her arrival and chugs her
martini.
```

Subheadings can be useful, but don't overuse them. Master scenes (scenes that aren't broken down into shots but simply tell us what's said and done at the given location) read very fluidly,

and fluidity is what you want in a spec script. Judicious use of subheadings, however, can make a complicated scene such as an action sequence read more flowingly than would a jumble of slugs.

Page Numbers
Put the page number at the top right corner of the page: just the number itself, followed by a period. (Without the period is acceptable but not preferable.) Don't number the first page. The first page of the script, not the title page, is page 1.

"Continued" and Scene Numbers
You don't need to write "CONTINUED" at the tops and bottoms of the pages in a spec script. It adds clutter, and some readers find it pretentious. Likewise, don't number the scenes. Those are for shooting scripts. You're writing a spec.

Breaking a Speech at the Bottom of the Page
Try not to break a speech at the bottom of the page—if it's short, it doesn't hurt to push the whole speech over to the next page. If you must break a speech, simply write as much as you can of the speech on the page then (optionally) place "(MORE)" under it:

```
                    TYLER
I can't stand you coming home late
                    (MORE)
```

Then resume the speech atop the following page:

```
                    TYLER (CONT'D)
night after night.
```

The Title Page
Center the title vertically in the middle of the page or a little bit higher.

Don't underline the title, use quotation marks, or choose any

typeface other than 12 point Courier or Courier New—the same as the rest of the script.

All caps (not boldfaced) will suffice. Skip a line before centering your name. Don't put your name in all caps.

It is acceptable to skip a line (double-space), center the word "by," then skip a line and center the name, but it's redundant because "by" is understood. Do not capitalize "by" unless the software insists.

Include your address, phone number, and email address on the lower right corner of the title page, single-spaced. I prefer flush left, ragged right for the contact information, but some prefer flush right, ragged left. Never forget to include this. Who knows what people's hands the script will fall into, and you want them to contact you.

If you have registered the script with the Writers Guild of America, include the registration in the lower left corner.

Never include a draft number or date on any script you submit to anyone. A low draft number will make people think that the script isn't ripe, and high draft number will make them think that it's old news. A copyright date is also a bad idea: a date from even a year ago makes people wonder what's wrong with the script that it hasn't sold yet.

Fade Out and Fade In

At the beginning of the first page you write "FADE IN:" to indicate that the script is beginning. Use a flush left margin. It's traditional.

At the end of the script, about 105 pages later, at the right-hand margin of the last page, indicate the end of the script by writing: "FADE OUT."

Do not write "FADE IN" and "FADE OUT" between the scenes. That would indicate a fade to black after every scene.

Some screenplays begin with "BLACK SCREEN" and a description of sounds, and some scripts end with "THE END."

Synopsis and Cast List
Unless someone insists, do not include a synopsis (plot summary) with your script. People will read the synopsis and skip the script. Never include a cast list or character list.

Cover
The script should be covered on front and back with single sheets of 8½ by 11 cardstock (60 to 110 lb.), any color.

No illustrations of any kind, and indeed no writing of any kind, should mar the cover. The script's title page will be inside the cover.

No Title on the Spine
The people to whom you submit scripts often write the title of a script on the spine so that it's easier to find on a bookshelf. They do that, not you.

Fasteners
Fasten your script with two, not three, round-headed brass brads. Make sure that those brads are sturdy so the script doesn't fall apart as people try to read it (very annoying). Acco #5 1¼-inch Solid Brass Fasteners, stock #71505, are a good choice (#6 is also acceptable). They come in boxes of 100. Order them now and keep them on hand, because if you live anywhere but Los Angeles no store will have them in stock. Never get brads that are too long and clip them, because that leaves sharp edges that rip your flesh or ruin your cocktail table. Do not under any circumstances have the copy shop bind your script with a plastic spiral. English people seem to like screw-in brads, which are kind of cool but a little pretentious if you're not English.

Credits
Don't bother specifying where the credits roll at the beginning and end of the film.

Montage

A montage is a series of shots, generally without dialogue, usually meant to show a process such as falling in love or becoming famous. Montages are often too-easy substitutes for a single strong scene of conflict and are seen as somewhat old-fashioned. Still, at times you might justifiably use them. They're double-spaced, with the shots indicated by dashes:

```
MONTAGE – PIERRE'S MEMORY OF CHARLOTTE

-- Pierre and Charlotte frolic on the beach.

-- Pierre and Charlotte stand at the altar on
their wedding day.

-- Pierre walks in on Charlotte on the divan
with a Shetland pony.
```

At the end of the montage you might include the following subheading: "BACK TO SCENE."

Insert Shots

If a brief shot of another location interrupts the scene—for example, a single-shot flashback, a letter, a computer screen, or a cell phone screen—you might employ an insert shot.

```
INSERT – ILSA'S NOTE
     "Dear Rick, You'd better leave Paris
     without me. I'll always remember you.
     Ilsa."

BACK TO SCENE
```

Notice that the letter is indented like dialogue but enclosed within quotation marks. "BACK TO SCENE" is unnecessary if a new slug follows the insert.

Camera and Editing Directions
Camera directions are in all caps, flush left, and formatted as description. You could indicate a couple of close-ups followed by a point of view (POV) shot in this way:

```
CU JOAN WINKING at Dirk.

CU DIRK noticing.

DIRK'S POV: CAMERA TILTS down Joan's
shapely body.
```

But you're not going to include camera directions, you're going to leave that to the director, so there's not much need for you to know how to do them. You can do it all with description: "Dirk takes in Joan's gorgeousness from her eyes down to her toes."

You're also going to avoid editing directions; but if you must include them, they're in all caps, flush right, followed by a colon. For example, you would write "DISSOLVE TO:" if you wanted to end a scene with a dissolve.

Superimposed Titles (Supers)
Supers are done this way: "SUPER: Somewhere in Pakistan."

FORMATTING AT A GLANCE
Never deviate from standard formatting. The goal is for your script to look like every other script on the producer's desk. The only thing that should stand out is the writing.

Paper: Three-hole, not two-hole. Normal white paper of the sort they don't charge extra for at the photocopy store.

Typeface: Standard 12-point Courier New, no boldface.

Cover: Covered on each side with a single sheet of plain, colored card stock. No illustrations.

Fasteners: Two sturdy, round-headed brass brads.

Title Page: Center the title a little above the middle of the page, all caps, with no underlining. Skip a line before writing

your name in caps and lowercase. Include your address, email address, and phone number on the lower right corner of the page, not all caps.

Page Numbers: Upper right corner of the page, preferably followed by a period. Don't count or number the title page.

Capitalization: Capitalize the SLUG LINE; CHARACTER NAME above a speech; CHARACTER NAME the first time it appears in the description (not in the dialogue); all technical instructions such as "SUPER" or "INTERCUT"; SUBHEADINGS such as "LATER"; (optional) important props and sound effects; and the TITLE.

Formatting Scenes

Elements of formatting used in scenes:

Slug Lines: Write in master scenes and provide a new slug every time you change locations. Slug lines begin at the left margin of the page. Begin with "INT." or "EXT.," skip a single space, tell us where we are, space, dash, space, then "DAY" or "NIGHT." Skip a line and begin the description.

Description: Include at least one brief line of description after every slug. It begins at the left-hand margin and goes all the way across the page, paragraphed like a business letter.

Speaker's Name above Dialogue: Indent twenty spaces (four tabs) for the character name above the speech. Dialogue should run in a column down the center of the page. In general your dialogue column should be no more than three and a half inches wide (about the width of your hand without your thumb). Don't skip a line between the speaker's name and the dialogue itself.

Dialogue: Indent the dialogue ten spaces (two tabs).

Parentheticals (aka wrylies or dialogue directions): Indent fifteen spaces (three tabs).

Camera Directions: Include few if any, all caps, formatted as description.

(O.S.) and (V.O.): To indicate that a character is heard but not seen, place the abbreviation "O.S." (offscreen) in parentheses directly to the right of the character's name. If the speaker functions more or less as an omniscient narrator, then use "(V.O.)" for "voice-over."

Long Speeches: If you reach the bottom of the page and a speaker is not finished talking, simply resume the speech on the next page, with the character's name followed by "(CONT'D)": "MARIA (CONT'D)."

CHECKLIST OF COMMON FIRST DRAFT FORMATTING MISTAKES

When students turn in their first drafts, certain errors tend to crop up more than others. Before showing your script to anyone important, check for these problems:

- forgetting that parentheticals are indented five spaces more than the actual dialogue.
- putting physical actions inside parentheticals.
- forgetting that dialogue does not run all the way to the right-hand page margin and other margin errors.
- forgetting that character names above speeches are all caps.
- using a typeface other than 12 point Courier or Courier New.
- forgetting to follow questions with question marks.
- forgetting to make a character name all caps the first time it appears in the description.
- mistakenly making a character name all caps the first time it appears in the dialogue.
- forgetting to skip a line after the slug.
- forgetting that the slug is all caps.
- leaving lonely slugs and character names at the bottom of a page. If a slug without its scene or a character name before a speech is marooned at the bottom of the page, push it to the next page.
- failing to break long blocks of description into paragraphs.
- forgetting to put page numbers in the upper right-hand corner.
- forgetting to put a line of description after every slug.

- forgetting to leave a space on either side of the dash in the slug line.

FORMATTING SOFTWARE

Just about any screenwriting software will do, including Final Draft and Movie Magic. Celtx is free on the Web, and my students say that it works fine. I format by hand.

DESCRIPTION

You have shaped your inspiration into a dramatizable idea and turned that spine into a step outline, based on your understanding of what a scene is and your knowledge of three-act structure. Moreover, you understand formatting and are therefore ready to write scenes. Still, before diving into the job, it would help to understand something more about the style issues involved in writing actual pages. Specifically, what's good style in description and dialogue? Let's start with description.

ONLY INCLUDE WHAT THE AUDIENCE CAN SEE AND HEAR

Only two kinds of information belong in a script: what the audience sees and what the audience hears.

If you're wondering, "Should I include this in the script?" ask yourself, "Can audiences see it or hear it?"

If not—how do they know?

The only way the audience can know anything is to see it on the screen or hear it through the speakers. Therefore you must subject all description to the "how does the audience know?" test.

This fails the test: "Mark comes in, having just played a strenuous game of soccer."

The reason: How does the audience know? The audience can't see where he's been, only where he is. The audience *can* see if he's sweating and carrying a soccer ball, and you may include that information if you wish, but you cannot tell us what he was doing before the movie saw him.

Wrong: "Horace peers into the face of the waif and remembers his own grisly childhood in Hell's Kitchen."

The reason: How do we know? We can't see or hear what people think, unless, of course, you provide cheesy voice-over. You may tell us that Horace has a pained expression on his face as he looks at the waif but not what he's thinking. To do so is cheating—telling the reader something that the people in the theatre have no way of knowing and thus unfairly making your screenplay tell a story that won't tell on the screen.

Now you're asking, "But how do I let the audience know what he's thinking?" Ah. That's the challenge: learning to convey information in the ways movies do. That's the trick of screenwriting and why it's different from prose fiction. Don't immediately grab for the easy way out—a voice-over or a flashback. Use ingenuity. Maybe establish earlier in the narrative that Horace suffered in childhood. Then, when we see his pained expression as he looks at the waif, we put the pieces together. Movie writing is all about putting pieces of information in front of audiences and trusting them to put everything together. That's the essence of what Lev Kuleshov proved.

Kuleshov's Experiment

The audience generally deduces internal states in film from the situation, and it only takes a shot or two. Soviet silent filmmaker Lev Kuleshov did a famous experiment in which he took a shot of the great actor Ivan Mosjoukine and joined it to a shot of a steaming bowl of soup. The audience said, "The actor is expressing hunger."

Then Kuleshov took the same shot of the actor and cut to a little girl in a coffin. "Oh," said the audience, "such a marvelous evocation of grief."

Then the *same shot* of Mosjoukine was used again, this time cutting to a shot of a sensuous lady lounging languidly on a divan. "Oh," cried the audience, "the subtlety of that Mosjoukine, he seems to be doing nothing at all but with the barest flicker of the eyebrow, the roiling, erotic lust . . ."

You get it. Shot of actor, shot of what he's looking at, and the

audience supplies the emotion. That's how emotion is conveyed on film—the filmmaker constructs a situation, and audiences empathize because they understand how such a situation would make them feel. That's why wooden actors can make classic films. It explains Gary Cooper.

PRESENT TENSE, NOT PRESENT PROGRESSIVE

Description is of course written in the present tense, because everything is happening now (unlike novels, which are usually written in the past tense).

Writers sometimes have a tendency to slip into the present progressive tense, which indicates something ongoing. Avoid the present progressive when possible.

Present progressive (wrong): "Grandma *is knitting* by the fire and Grandpa *is reading* the *Times*."

Present tense (preferable): "Grandma *knits* by the fire. Grandpa *reads* the *Times*."

So remember to keep your verbs active and present tense. The present progressive, with its "is" and "are," feels mushy. Cinema works best with the click-click-click of discrete bits of information. We give a piece of data then another then another, and they add up to more than their sum. The present tense seems to imply this, where the present progressive does not.

NARRATE EVENTS IN THE ORDER IN WHICH WE SEE THEM

Cleanly present things in the order in which you want the audience to see them.

Wrong: Julian fires after loading the pistol and cocking the trigger.

Right: Julian loads the pistol, cocks the trigger, and fires.

Wrong: Jennifer pauses the movie after Deo's phone vibrates.

Also wrong: As Deo's phone vibrates Jennifer pauses the movie.

Right: Deo's phone vibrates. Jennifer pauses the movie.

SLOPPINESS

Misspellings, incorrect punctuation, typos, dropped words, lousy grammar, and continuity errors are forbidden. We all have strengths and weaknesses as writers, depending on our natural gifts, but precision is a virtue available to us all. Never send out a sloppy script. If you are a hopeless speller like F. Scott Fitzgerald, get someone to proofread even if you have to pay. And don't imagine that neatness is somehow "beneath an artist." Careful presentation makes a big difference in how your work is perceived and even whether it's understood as you intended it. More importantly it makes reading it smoother, faster, and more pleasurable. A script can't be a "page-turner" if it stops the reader eight times a page with omitted words and misplaced apostrophes.

PUNCTUATION

Correct punctuation of description is a must—but that applies only to description. Dialogue may be punctuated more expressively and need not be grammatically correct.

AVOID CAMERA JARGON

You are writing in master scenes. That means leaving the camera directions to the director. Certainly you can write in a way that *suggests* shots by providing information and details in a particular order. But "close-ups," "smash cuts," "pans," and "POV shots" are the director's job. Avoid technical jargon. It takes us away from the characters and the plot. If something happens in the background of a shot, write "background" not "b.g."

INTRODUCING CHARACTERS

The trick to introducing characters is giving a vivid impression of them as quickly as possible, without telling too much or too little.

We need to know, at a minimum, the character's age (preferably the precise age because that's more vivid and memorable) and sex (which we'll usually assume from the name—by the way,

gender-specific names make for easier reading). Then include a sentence or two that gives a striking impression of the person's presence or "type" without being unnecessarily specific about height, weight, and hair color. When the characters walk in, what impression do they make? For example, "BLANCHE, 55, is a truck stop waitress with a face like 55 miles of bad highway."

You've given us an impression of her presence, but the filmmakers are still free to cast a heavy blonde Latina or a slim, redheaded Eskimo; they're free to choose the best actor in a way they wouldn't be if they were locked into an unnecessarily precise physical description.

Of course, if the part requires a tall actor because the dialogue is full of tall jokes and height is crucial to the story, you certainly must include in the description the information that the character is tall. But avoid physical specifics that aren't necessary and focus on type: style, social class, telling details.

Don't tell us people's histories or their character traits when we meet them. That's cheating and counterproductive. Remember: write only what audiences can see and what they can hear.

Don't tell us, "Boone is the class clown."

Do have Boone blurt out funny lines in class. That way the reader will find out how funny Boone is at the same time the audience in the theatre does and not before.

Wrong: "MAY is an exceptionally attractive Asian woman in her middle to late 30s, but she looks younger. She's had a lot of success for a lot of years—she's the sort of person for whom everything comes easily—but it's left her with a certain shallowness and lack of compassion for other people's problems. She walks with an undetectable limp, the reminder of a childhood spelunking incident."

Except for May's age and ethnicity, none of that will get across to the audience because none of it can be seen or heard, including the "undetectable" limp.

You might be saying now, "Yes, but won't it help the actor?" Maybe or maybe not. I've seen plenty of writers give detailed descriptions of characters when we meet them but fail to make the characters conform to the descriptions in the scenes them-

selves. It's no good and indeed does harm to introduce Afifah as a "woman of great strength" and proceed to give us a character who crumbles under pressure. Furthermore, writing elaborate descriptions of character can fool writers into thinking that they've done the job of characterization when they haven't. Characters come alive on the screen in what they do and say, in the goals and tactics that they choose, not in what's written in the introductory description. *Show* us who the character is in scenes of conflict; don't *tell* us in narration.

LENGTH OF DESCRIPTIVE PASSAGES

Descriptive passages should be short. Give exactly as much information as the audience needs and not a scrap more. If you find your pages full of long, dark blocks of description, you've probably written too much. At least break them into paragraphs, which may be as short as a single sentence or single word: "KABOOM!"

Descriptive passages should seldom run more than four or five lines and should never be at all taxing or confusing.

Eliminate every unnecessary word and phrase. Excessive length in descriptive passages, circling around the meaning and jabbing at it from this angle and that, makes the description harder to understand, not easier. A lot of people read scripts by looking only at the dialogue and skipping the descriptions entirely. The longer and denser the block of description, the less likely it is to be read by a busy reader. Only the briefest descriptions catch such a reader's attention. Is that bad? Not really, because it imposes a discipline on the writer. You are forced to simplify your own conception of the action itself, making it cleaner and more direct, less dithering and repetitive—in a word, more cinematic. Cinematic action ideally is strong, direct, singular, unembroidered, clear, and elegantly simple, as the description of it should be.

Within your brief descriptions, it's best to keep the sentences themselves as short as possible yet still grammatical. A writer's first instinct when confronted with a failure to communicate is to add words, but try subtraction. Clarity is often best achieved

by taking words away. If you have a confusing patch of script where you're just not getting across what's going on, try accomplishing it with fewer words and you'll be amazed by how much clarity you achieve. Say you've got a huge martial arts battle that climaxes your film, full of elaborate fight choreography. How can you possibly describe it?

"They fight."

Of course, it's better to sell the moment a little harder than that, to bring the moment to life in an exciting way, but the point is that you have the freedom to leave the specifics of the fight and other such action to the director's discretion.

CUTTING

I once received an envelope from a writer and knew even before I opened it that the pages would be overwritten. The envelope was upholstered front and back with packing tape, the kind with reinforcing cords strung through it, and emblazoned with multiple Priority Mail stickers, front and back, as though the sender didn't trust anyone to get anything right. He did the same thing in his screenwriting. Where he might simply have said "Steve nods," he provided instead something like "Steve moves his head up and down, indicating with said gesture an affirmative response." Each move was nailed down, braced, screwed into place, and double-caulked.

Reading fussy staging and over-elaboration in the descriptions is boring, a little insulting, and in the end grueling—even when the prose is excellent. It requires too much stopping and thinking, and your reader loses touch with the narrative urgency in the thicket of detail. Concentrate on story, not the choreography of the characters' physical movements or the mesmerizing brilliance of your voice. "The perfection of art is to conceal art," wrote Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoria*.

There's a wonderful passage in Moss Hart's *Act One* in which he talks about working with George S. Kaufman, legendary playwright and charter member of the Algonquin Round Table. The young Hart had written a flawed but promising play and been teamed with Kaufman for the rewrite. Kaufman applied his blue

pencil to one scene in particular, deleting speeches, crossing out words and clauses, and generally cutting away the "underbrush." When he was done the scene was drastically shorter.

Hart read the result—and then marveled aloud that he could have been so stupid as to overwrite it so grievously in the first place: the newly pared scene was wonderfully clear, economical, and urgent. Hart admitted that it now worked much better.

Kaufman rejoined glumly, "I thought the cuts would show you why it *wouldn't* work."

In other words, cutting the irrelevancies out of a scene not only improved the scene—it revealed that the scene wasn't needed at all.

What Kaufman did was akin to what we do in step outlining when we boil a scene down to a single sentence. We can look at that step and easily see whether it's integral to the overall pattern of the plot. By doing that in the step outline phase we cut the extraneous scene before we've even had the bother of writing it.

Speaking of cutting and legendary writers, a UCLA professor used to tell a perhaps apocryphal but nevertheless wonderful anecdote about F. Scott Fitzgerald at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Mogul Louis B. Mayer supposedly stormed into Fitzgerald's office, threw a script onto the Great American Novelist's desk, and barked, "Mr. Fitzgerald—*we cannot shoot adjectives!*"

Sweating out a delirious sentence such as "The dusk shimmers iridescently in heliotrope purple, lending an enchanted aura to the verandah" just doesn't help the director. What directors need from writers is a story with characters doing things that can be shot with a camera: nouns, verbs, and objects. "Daisy slaps Tom." Fortunately, the problem of wordiness is easily solved. Cutting is the aspirin of screenwriting. In every kind of writing, what you leave out is as important as what you put in. This is even truer in screenwriting, because you pretty much have to get everything out of the way in less than two hours. The craft of writing is full of nifty maxims to guide the writer toward concision:

"Omit needless words."

"Less is more."

And my favorite: "When in doubt, cut it out."

Leave room for the imagination of the readers. Let them participate. A bore is someone who tells everything. Develop the knack of leaving out just enough so that readers or viewers have to put things together—but don't make putting it all together so hard that they have to stop or ponder; stopping is death for a dramatic narrative. The audience can't go back and "reread" a confusing film sequence. So be clear, but don't burden readers with anything extra. We're on an adventure. Pack light. In a well-sorted-out script, everything is integrated, working together, and seemingly simple (though it's the kind of simplicity that takes work to achieve).

The trick is in knowing what to leave out.

THE "DON'TS" OF ECONOMICAL WRITING

Don't do everyone else's job. Especially don't direct. Don't tell us whose POV a shot is, when to "dissolve," or what camera angles to choose. These directions not only slow down the reader but also insult the director, who will ignore your suggestions anyway. It isn't your job to inflect the dialogue, insert dramatic pauses, or specify every bit of stage business. Those are all matters to be worked out between the actor and the director, and they can do it better than you can. If you write your dialogue and structure your scenes skillfully, the material itself will demand that it be presented in a certain way. If not, the actors and director will think of some clever way to play it, as will the readers in their imaginations. Remember, your job is to give us action and dialogue and through those plot, theme, characterization, and a suggestion of style. That's a lot. Don't bother doing the acting and directing on top of it. Don't costume the characters. There's a costume designer for that. Don't light or decorate the set or dress the star's hair. Other people will do all that better than you ever could. How wonderful! You're free to concentrate on your job of moving characters through a plot and writing the dialogue. Look at all the things you don't have to worry about. Moreover, by avoiding all that other stuff, you won't make the mistake that so many screenwriters make—thinking that they've done their job when really they've distracted themselves with everything but. Your

job is to create a plot made of characters and their words and actions.

Don't waste time on entrances and exits. Watching people come into and go out of rooms is boring. The same for ordering meals and drinks. Get around it. Join the scene in progress. Cut away before things get dull. The audience has seen movies before. If you cut from a scene of your hero having drinks in the solarium to a scene of her stealing fruit from monkeys at the zoo they'll figure out that she said good-bye to everyone in the solarium, got in a car, and drove to the zoo.

Don't tell us anything that we don't absolutely need to know. Who cares whether the heroine has blue eyes and black hair? Suppose the most bankable star of the moment has brown eyes and auburn hair and is simply gasping to do your project. Do you say, "Take a hike, cow! Can't you read? The heroine is blue-eyed!" No. You say, "Why, such a coincidence—I wrote this with your voice in my head!"

Don't tell us anything that we would assume or infer on our own. If your character is a called "The Princess," you needn't mention that she's beautiful—it goes without saying. If she was an exceptionally plain princess that would be another matter: it would be incumbent upon you to note it. If the sea is blue, it goes without saying. We'll assume a lot if you don't specify, so take advantage of that. Don't tell us, "The waiter enters, pen and pad in hand." Waiters usually approach with pen and pad in hand—and even if this one didn't, so what? Now, if he enters carrying a severed head, feel free to expend a few words on that because the prop master should know.

Don't tell us the same thing twice. Beginning screenwriters seem to think that it's somehow "subtle" to dribble out information in a series of oblique hints or that repetition is artistic and poetic. No. Tell us a thing once, firmly, exactly when we need to know it, and move on. Intentional foreshadowing is one thing, but dribbling out information is another. Writers often repeat themselves because they're unsure if they've established something clearly, but your job as a writer is to determine exactly the point at which a piece of information appears in the script.

Don't tell us anything too long before we need to know it. Do not, for example, describe at the top of the scene the whole setting right down to the paintings on the wall and all the characters in the room. The time to describe something is when the audience is supposed to notice it, even if it's been there all along. Anything that we're told too early we'll simply forget. Provide information as it is needed. If the heroine is going to collapse onto the fainting couch later in the scene, you needn't follow the slug line with a minutely detailed description of the room designed to disguise that you're "slipping in" the fainting couch too: but you don't want to telegraph that there will be fainting later in the scene, so you also need to mention the piano. "Sally faints and lands on the Victorian fainting couch." The first we hear of the couch is the moment Sally hits it. Why? Because we don't need to think about the couch until that moment and the audience in the theatre will certainly not notice it until that moment, so why bring it up any earlier? Give audiences information at the precise moment they need it. It's also a good idea to describe characters as they become relevant. Suppose you're writing about a town meeting where a lot of people are going to speak. A common mistake is to describe them all in a clump at the top of the scene, like this: "Smith enters the town meeting. He sees CLAIR, a 26-year-old librarian type; JOHN, a 50-year-old in farmer overalls; OLIVE, 33, obviously a soccer mom," and so on. By the time these people speak the readers will have forgotten all about them—the readers skimmed the human laundry list to begin with because they had no reason to care. Wait until these people are about to speak to describe them. "JOHN, 50, in farmer overalls, raises his hand." After all, doesn't describing them at that moment better approximate the viewing experience? Isn't that when the audience will first note them? Before the characters speak or act, they're just faces in a crowd. In general, when it comes time to hear someone speak, introduce the character right there. Scatter character descriptions through the scene; don't clump them together.

Don't overwrite the top of the scene. Set the scene in a few quick strokes:

EXT. MANHATTAN – DAY

Cathleen sashays down the avenue as if three wealthy men were following.

Don't tell us anything that the audience in the theatre has no way of knowing. This especially applies to things that your character is thinking: "Harry looks at Jeffrey and imagines what his head would look like in a jar of formaldehyde." (Of course if you're very Expressionist you can do it with an insert shot.) Don't give us backstory in the descriptive passages: "Reese, who happens to be Robinson's long lost sister, enters."

Don't tell us thoughts. In description you cannot tell us what people are thinking because, unlike the novel, cinema has no way of directly conveying inner thought. People can speak their thoughts aloud or in dialogue (including voice-over, but that's a little cheap), or we can infer their thoughts from their actions or their situations. Very often writers tell us thoughts that are so obvious that we would have guessed them in any case, which is repetitive and boring.

Don't tell us what we're about to see. For example, don't open a scene with the description "Abe and Tina discuss the murder" and then go on to write a scene of Abe and Tina discussing the murder. Why tell the readers what they're about to read? It's redundant.

Don't describe every little nod, gesture, and smile of your characters. While it is good to give characters character-revealing actions (punching, slapping, shooting, hugging, kissing, and biting are all reliable choices), it is not your place to describe every bit of stage business. It is usually best to leave to the actors when to stand, when to pause, how to gesture, and what inflections to employ. If the gesture replaces a line, that's another matter. For example, when John says, "Where's your mother?" and Tiffany's response is described as "Tiffany points at the steamer trunk." That's OK. That's using a gesture to substitute for a line of dialogue. It's necessary to describe it—without the description the

readers would be confused. But on the whole let the actors act. I especially hate the word "turns," as in "John turns and walks to the door"—as if the actor would sidle crab-like over to the door, thinking: "I wish the writer had specified a turn!"

Don't overwrite descriptions of the actors' movements. "Ethel removes the telephone receiver from her ear and propels it through the air until it lands on its cradle with a firm click." You mean she hangs up? Over-precision takes time and draws attention to itself. Also, it's limiting in its specificity. If you replaced it with "Ethel hangs up the phone," the description would not only be shorter but would give the reader and the actor room to imagine different ways of doing the action—for example, reaching over and pressing down the hook with her hand. Try not to wrap everything up so tightly. Let go. Don't bother. It's not worth even an extra second. A second is quite long when it's boring. Why tell us a man sets the groceries down "on the counter." If he should set them on the ground or the stove, would the plot be altered?

Don't overwrite the first page. You want the first page, perhaps more than any other, to read smoothly and easily in order to suck the reader in, right? And yet if there is one page that writers are inclined to fill with dithering prose, it is page one.

Don't overwrite the beginning and ends of scenes. Looking for places to cut? Check out the beginnings and ends of your scenes.

Don't use people's cultural tastes as a spurious shortcut to characterization. College students in particular are wont to use a character's taste in music as a mark of good or evil. Using someone's taste in art or literature as evidence of goodness is tantamount to saying that you can judge people's character by their aesthetic preferences, when in fact we all know that Nazi generals adored impressionist paintings and Picasso put out cigarettes on women. Moreover, from a practical point of view, a lot of people don't share your taste in music or art, so your point will be utterly lost on them. In film we judge character by action, not cultural artifacts, and putting a book of philosophy in a character's hand is not doing the job of characterization.

Don't write "monster talk" description. In the bad old days of

racism, minorities and monsters talked the same way: they left out words. "Great father in Washington make peace with red man." "Frankenstein want revenge!" Sometimes screenwriters talk this way too, in the mistaken belief that leaving out definite and indefinite articles and conjunctions is somehow more "screenwriterish." "Tom enters porch, looks at table." It's a false economy. It saves few words but sounds affected and clumsy. "Tom enters the porch and looks at the table" sounds much better. Go ahead. Treat yourself to a conjunction. The human mind absorbs information most readily when it is presented in full, logical, grammatical sentences (but in screenwriting preferably short ones without a lot of adjectives). Now, there are exceptions: for instance, if you're setting up "the dog park," your description might be "Dogs, owners, lots of chasing." There's no advantage in clarity or grace to be gained from turning that into a full sentence. Use sentence fragments in description as you would in prose fiction, but stay away from monster talk.

Don't use the dreaded "we see" in description. Of course we see it—it's a movie. Reading "we see" breaks the spell. Just describe it.

Don't break up speeches with unnecessary bits of description and stage business. This habit turns a flowing stream of drama into wrenching rapids. Obviously, when someone has a long speech it's sometimes a good idea to break it into chunks to disguise its reader-daunting length. But this situation should be rare: if the speech really is too long then you have disguised but not solved the problem.

Don't include cute asides to the reader. Some screenwriters think it's fun to include asides to the reader, but they remind the reader of the author behind the story and break the spell.

Don't specify music. Music rights are a nightmare and have broken many an indie filmmaker. Even big-shot directors don't always get the specific music they want. Leave the choice of music to the music supervisor.

Don't include anything for which you don't own the rights. Hercules is in the public domain, but Batman cannot be a charac-

ter in your script. You don't own Batman and the people who do own him are not going to read your script because they're afraid of lawsuits. When in doubt, come up with something original.

Don't bore us with drab, repetitive words. Mark Twain (quoted in *The Art of Authorship* by George Bainton) said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." Verbs are especially important. Don't "cover" the ankle in tape; "wrap" it. Characters ought not "walk" across the room ten times per page: they can canter, saunter, stroll, or strut. Be precise, as you would in a poem, but not showy. Obviously, this is something you worry more about in rewrite—if a first-draft scene is pouring out of you, you don't want to stop and agonize over a verb in the description.

Don't include forced, obvious symbols. Meanings and symbols will emerge naturally from the story you tell. Read Mary McCarthy's essay "Settling the Colonel's Hash" for more about this.

Don't waste the audience's time showing off your gorgeous prose. If you can express yourself smartly and stylishly in the descriptions without extraneous words, by all means do so, but never go out of your way to leave in some piece of flashy writing that is unnecessary to the job of advancing the story. It costs too much in terms of pace and fools you into thinking you're doing your job. That is not to say that your prose should be slapdash or incorrect, because that undermines the reader's confidence in your work. Clear, workmanlike prose will do fine, and polishing up the prose is for the second draft.

Don't do everything with dialogue. Provide your characters with actions and look for opportunities to substitute actions for words.

A Few Don'ts That Apply to Dialogue

Don't use clichés. If a thought has been expressed with a certain combination of words a trillion times we can assume that the audience is numb to the charms of that formulation by now. By

cliché I mean any expression we've heard before. "You go, girl." "I'll be there for you." "I have a bad feeling about this." "She looked like a deer in the headlights." "An ah-ha moment." As for "cleverly" twisting a cliché, well, it had better be funny.

Don't include greetings, polite conversation, or small talk. "Hello, how are you, good-bye, care for a drink, what can I make you"—such words and phrases are essential lubricants to human interaction but almost always expendable in screenwriting. Get into the scene after the hellos have been said and get out without good-byes. If the point of the scene is the sister bidding her brothers adieu as they leave for the Civil War, of course, that's important. But in general greetings and other pleasantries are bores that do nothing to push your story forward.

Don't say "ad lib." If something needs to be said, the writer should write it in the script. When authors write, "They ad-lib their good-byes," it means that they can't be bothered to write them. Do they imagine that seeing them ad-libbed on the screen will be less dull?

Don't include jargon or slang. When you use words that people don't know in a screenplay, it breaks the dramatic spell. And slang won't seem so groovy a few years hence.

DESCRIPTION AT A GLANCE

The paramount thing to keep in mind about description is that it must include only information that the audience can see or hear in the theater.

Therefore you cannot summarize or "narrate" the script the way the novelist narrates a novel. The kind of information that you can provide on the pages of the script is strictly limited. That's the trick of screenwriting and what differentiates it from prose fiction. A novelist can tell us all kinds of things about what's in someone's subconscious and what happened last year. If it's something the audience cannot see or hear, right now, the screenwriter can't include it.

The other thing to remember about description is that it should be brief and to the point. There are many "don'ts" to guide

you in what to leave out, but they mostly boil down to one: don't do everyone else's job. The director will direct. Trained actors will read your lines so well that you'll think somebody else wrote them. The location scout will find scenery, the costume designer will handle the gowns, and the editor will provide the "smash cuts."

DIALOGUE

What is good dialogue? The paradoxical aphorisms of Oscar Wilde? The calculated inarticulation of Sam Shepard? The moral earnestness of Arthur Miller?

All and none of the above. You'll have your own style, and it will come from your soul. It's often said: "Character and dialogue you're born with; the rest can be learned." I think what that means is that human beings are social animals and can't survive life in the pack unless they can read character, so we all have that skill. And most of us can speak. So, while there are ways to improve your understanding of dialogue and the quality of the dialogue you write, you probably come to the party knowing more than you think you do.

Movie dialogue should be lean and concise, certainly must be believable, and should be better than everyday conversation: more stylized, wittier, pithier, more articulate, more mysterious, more lyrical, or more something. It's great when dialogue has snap, like the dry, hardboiled quips in a Bogart noir ("My, my, my! Such a lot of guns around town and so few brains"). Yet dialogue should feel as if it's being made up on the spot: unforced, fresh, and effortless. At its finest, it's full of nuances, intentions, and layers, while not seeming to be. The best humor springs from the natural course of conversation as it reveals character and situation rather than from sitcom one-liners. When you do go out of your way to grab a laugh of questionable relevance, be sure it's a laugh.

The most important thing to remember is that *dialogue must*

always advance the plot and always be "in character." It therefore helps to be writing characters you know or types you know.

There's seldom room for small talk, greetings, or pleasantries.

At the other end of the scale, you should avoid philosophical digressions, preaching, or grand speeches that chew the theme.

Dialogue is not conversation. Claiming "But Aunt Tina really said that" is no defense. People often say things in real life that don't make good lines in movies.

All in all, dialogue has to do everything at once: plot, character, style, and theme. It's easier than it sounds, and you'll probably do it automatically.

GOOD DIALOGUE IS SPOKEN FOR A REASON

Unlike conversation, dialogue is always purposeful even when it's pretending not to be. When actors study a script, they go over it line by line and ask themselves on a moment-to-moment basis, "What does my character want here? What is my character's hidden desire? How do I want to make this other character feel?" The actor is looking for the character's goal in that moment. Once the actor knows what the character is trying to achieve, then she knows how to say the line. When the character makes the remark "Your eyes are twin pools of cerulean blue," he's not making a detached aesthetic observation but is trying to sleep with the woman. His tactic is to make her feel beautiful and appreciated. This motivation gives the line weight and depth. If your scenes are "on spine" that'll happen more or less inevitably.

Characters are after something. Words are things they use, however circuitously or indirectly, to get what they want. If you have supplied a character with a goal in the scene and written words that pursue it, the actors will have no trouble bringing the scene to life. The clearest, most concrete goals lead to the strongest, most specific acting choices. Acting is more than slapping on a putty nose, affecting a German accent, and walking with a limp. Surface details help convey the style and particularity of the character, but at heart dramatic characters are about pursuing objectives. If your characters are just yakking for the sake of

yakking, even if it's wildly clever and completely in character, it makes the actors' job much harder, because then they have to supply the motivation that's missing in the script. (Really good actors can indeed save you in that way, and you love, love, love them for it, but it's not smart to depend on it.)

DIALOGUE THAT'S "ON THE NOSE"

Dialogue is said to be on the nose when it is too direct, too obvious, or over-explained. If dialogue sounds inane or boring or abrupt, this is a sign that it may be too on the nose. There's a fine line between clarity, which is to be desired, and over-explicitness.

Let's examine dialogue that's too direct and compare it with dialogue that's less direct.

There are three levels of dialogue. Imagine a man with a gun, making a statement that will be followed by the firing of that gun. The first level of dialogue is completely on the nose: "I'm going to shoot you dead." The character simply states his intention to kill.

The second level is less on the nose: "A man could get killed tapping his fingers like that." He states his intention more indirectly, by implication. If a man could get killed tapping his fingers like that, and our guy is tapping his fingers, well . . .

The third level does not refer at all to the actual meaning: "I hate the monsoon." The line and its meaning seem to have no connection—or at least no connection that is obvious. But we get the idea. Harold Pinter writes entire plays like this, where people almost never quite say what they mean.

What characters actually say is called "text." What they actually mean, what's under the line, is "subtext." Subtext is fun because it makes audiences do a little work to figure it out, which engages them.

There's a moment in Leo McCarey's *Love Affair* when Maria Ouspenskaya says, "I don't like boat whistles." She means that it's time to say good-bye but she doesn't want to part.

Subtext is useful in comedy because dishonesty, hypocrisy, and trickery are funny. If characters say one thing but we can smell something less noble underneath, it gets a laugh.

Also, there is a special comic "pop" to lines that take a moment to figure out. "Take my wife. Please."

Pretending to be polite (text) while you're actually being rude (subtext) is a common strategy of comedy writing. When Bogart in *Casablanca* looks over the dossier that the Nazis have compiled on him and drily observes, "Are my eyes really brown?" he means, "Yeah, yeah, you compile dossiers, aren't you the big, bad Nazis; too bad I'm not impressed with you or your dossiers." In other words, under the line, he's insulting them.

For some reason, love is particularly problematic when it comes to being on the nose. It's been said that characters should never say, "I love you," and seduction scenes are famous for their use of double entendre: "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? Just put your lips together and blow." I'd peg that snatch of dialogue somewhere beyond the second level.

Speaking of declarations of love, there's a great final line in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*. The hero, after many ups and downs, has won the fetching Miss Kubelik at last. He tries to express in words how much he loves her, how amazed he is that she's his at last, but she shoves him a deck of cards and cuts him off with "Shut up and deal." The line makes you laugh and weep because you instantly get what she means: "I'm not going anywhere. We have fifty years to fill. We'll love and fight and make up and get old and die. All pretenses will drop away. The courtship is over, so simmer down and let's get started on the rest of it, which is a marathon."

Wilder and his writing partner I. A. L. Diamond were geniuses at last lines that seemed quotidian but contained worlds of implication. For example, Joe E. Brown says to Jack Lemmon at the end of *Some Like It Hot*: "Nobody's perfect." I'd tell you what it means, but I'd rather you watch the movie because it's the best last line in the history of filmed comedy—there are too many spoilers in this book as it is.

Characters Who Use Tactics Avoid Being On the Nose

In a sense, on-the-nose dialogue is dialogue where the speaker fails to employ creative tactics. Yes, your character could just say,

"Give me the twenty bucks" over and over like a broken record. In real life that might get the twenty bucks, but it would be on the nose. Instead, he could try flattery: "I know that twenty isn't much to a big man like you, but to me it's a lot."

He could try guilt: "Of course, the kids have nothing to eat at home, but I guess they could go to the crumbling windowsill and chew some lead-based paint chips."

He could threaten: "I know where you live."

Inanity

Webster's defines "inane" as "empty, vacant," or "lacking a sense or meaning; foolish; silly." Inanity is when the cool dogs are chasing cars and the nerd dog comes up and says, "So, whatcha doin'? Chasin' cars?" Um, yes, we are.

Inane remarks are made when people don't really have anything to say, so they make a remark for the sake of saying something. Inane dialogue happens when a beginning screenwriter wants to fill pages but doesn't understand that in order to do so the characters need a clear purpose (goal) and opposition (conflict).

WRITING ON THE LINE

While obviousness is usually wrong, sometimes it's great. Bernard Shaw said (in *John Bull's Other Island*), "My way of joking is to tell the truth. It's the funniest joke in the world." When characters really say what they're thinking instead of censoring themselves as society demands, that deviation from the norm can be hilarious. Shaw's pal Oscar Wilde was an expert at writing on the line. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play that has been filmed at least twice, Lady Bracknell quizzes her niece's suitor, telling him that she believes a man should either know nothing or know everything and inquiring which is true of him.

Jack: I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with the natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the

> bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.

Ha! Like so many of the very rich, Lady Bracknell favors keeping the lower orders in ignorance—but instead of pretending otherwise, she states it aloud and without equivocation. She says exactly what she's thinking whether it's acceptable or not. That's what we call writing on the line. (Yet it's also an example of subtext: "I'm rich and don't care if you think my ideas are idiotic.")

The funniest moment in Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* is when George W. Bush, addressing a black-tie assemblage, remarks, "This is an impressive crowd—the haves and the have-mores. Some people call you the elite. I call you my base." In a performance worthy of Lady Bracknell, he blatantly announces a truth that would normally never be spoken by a politician: we're out to help the rich. It's on the nose and on the line, yet, like Lady Bracknell's speech, loaded with subtext as well.

EACH SPEECH CONNECTS DIRECTLY TO THE NEXT

Ideally, in good dialogue, each speech is a link in a chain, firmly connected to the speech immediately before it and the speech that immediately follows. Each speech flows out of the speech that precedes it, just as each scene flows directly out of the scene that precedes it in a properly linear script with a strong sense of cause and effect.

Each speech is in a sense a response to the line before it. Connect speeches to the speeches that immediately precede them instead of replying to something said half a page ago. A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D.

ANNOUNCEMENT-STYLE DIALOGUE VERSUS ONE POINT PER SPEECH

Sometimes a writer, wanting to get all that nasty exposition out at once, will fall into what I call "announcement style" dialogue. That's when a character blurts out a string of statements that are really separate points that could and should be said separately. Sometimes they aren't really connected and sound awkwardly strung together, as though the writer is nervously saying everything that pops into her head for fear of not having enough to write. At other times the component points follow each other logically but all come out in a rush, as though the writer wants to have her characters simply announce the information that the audience needs and get the whole unpleasant business over with, rather than let the information emerge naturally in the course of the conflict as a result of the characters' pursuits of their purposes.

Good dialogue has a sense of give and take, back and forth, banter and retort, ping and pong. When you find your characters making strings of announcements, you need to break them up.

Here's an example of how to repair announcement-style dialogue. Greg is throwing a barbecue for his boss's birthday and decides at the last minute to go out for ice. His wife objects.

ANNIE

Are you kidding? We have plenty of ice. Besides, they'll be here any minute. I cannot make small talk with these people.

GREG

The way these people drink, the ice will be gone in half an hour. Relax—I have plenty of time. And if they do get here before I get back, you'll charm them like you always do. Everyone loves you.

Notice that Annie makes three statements in a row, in a rush to get them out. She expends all her ammo, so to speak, on a single speech. That forces Greg likewise to make three points in a single speech, with each point forced to "reach back" into the body of the previous speech, rebutting points that, frankly, we've already forgotten. The cure is simple.

Break Up Speeches

The problem of announcement-style or "listing" dialogue is solved by breaking up the speeches so that each speech makes a single point, producing a back-and-forth effect.

ANNIE
Are you kidding? We have plenty of ice.

GREG
The way these people drink, the ice will be gone in half an hour.

ANNIE
They'll be here any minute.

GREG
Relax—I have plenty of time.

ANNIE
I cannot make small talk with these people.

GREG
You'll charm them like you always do. Everyone loves you.

The rhythm of the scene is snappier with the speeches broken up. Now each counterargument that Greg makes directly follows the pertinent argument from Annie, and each speech seems to flow out of the one that precedes it. It's easier to follow too.

Imagine a closely fought sporting event where the scores are never far apart—one side scores a point, then the other side scores a point, and then the first side gets another point. It's exciting. Now imagine a game where at first one team gets way ahead. That's the game that people leave early. A tight race is more exciting and pleasurable for the audience. The most exciting races are neck and neck. You'll achieve that if you follow a simple rule: one point per speech.

Say It Once

Generally, each speech should make one point and make that point once.

Writers have a tendency to write speeches where characters say the same thing two or three times in different ways, intending emphasis and clarity but really muddying the waters. There's a difference between poetic repetition and redundancy. When you find yourself saying the same thing more than once in a single speech, you're probably blurring and blunting your meaning.

When faced with multiple statements saying the same thing, pick the one statement that is the least on the nose.

For example, if someone suggests to a professional masseuse that she'd make more money providing sexual favors along with the rubdown, she might say, "I would never. I'm a fastidious person. Messy." Any of those three sentences would do on its own as they all mean the same thing, but which one should stay and which two should go? Well, read the line of dialogue again and ask: which sentence is the least on the nose?

"Messy."

Implication is better because it gives the audience the pleasure of inferring or putting together the meaning, which gives a feeling of depth and layers and, by the way, has a better chance of being funny.

NEW CONFLICT, NEW SCENE

Students sometimes ask, "How do I use dialogue to accomplish a graceful transition?" I reply, "Why are you pushing the scene

someplace it doesn't want to go?" A properly conceived scene doesn't have to "change the subject" because it has one central conflict. The scene flows smoothly because it's about one thing. When that conflict is resolved it will be cleanly over, and you just cut to the next scene.

However, beginning writers have a tendency to set up "discussions" where characters thrash out a shopping list of issues that are not necessarily related. They finish writing such a scene and say, "Oh, look how much I've accomplished in this scene," but the characters have just "discussed" a scattered range of topics to dump a lot of information on the table. The writers haven't written a scene of drama at all—they've written a rambling, undramatic conversation with transitions that force the characters from one topic to the next. (This is why the verb "discuss" is *verboten* in step outlines.)

In general the rule is this: new conflict, new scene.

What I call "yanking transitions" sometimes happen when writers have some joke or remark or propaganda speech that they want to work their way over to, so they just have the speaker change the subject. People don't "change the subject" for no reason in scenes of drama (unless you're going for a comic effect—the character has some pet obsession and can't keep his mind on the subject at hand: "Did you say *bacon*?").

If you remember that characters must say things for their own reasons as characters, not for the writer's convenience, then you'll never have this trouble.

CONTRACTIONS

You use contractions. I use contractions. Queen Elizabeth II uses contractions in her Christmas Message to the People of the Commonwealth.

In screenplay dialogue everybody uses contractions. If you're used to other styles of writing—academic, legal—it may seem wrong, but in dialogue "will not" is "won't," "do not" is "don't," and "the bacon is done" is "the bacon's done." An exception to this *might* be when you reject contractions in order to achieve a

certain effect, such as a "period" sound, but contemporary characters use contractions even when they are British.

CHOPPED DIALOGUE

Don't chop up your dialogue by inserting little bits of stage direction in its midst; it gives the script a tyrannical feel. Who has time to stop and imagine all these facial expressions you describe? Wrong:

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                CAROLYN
How are you feeling?
        (shaking her head)
Not so good, eh?
        (with a smile)
You'll get better. I know it.
```

Cut the parentheticals and this speech will be fine.

FRAGMENTATION

Fragmentation is writing in partial sentences. Certainly this is quite acceptable in dialogue, but it can go too far and become an annoying tic. I know one writer with a tendency to drop the first few words of a sentence, especially the subject, à la George Bush *père*, and to replace transitional words with ellipses: "Can't raise taxes . . . not politically feasible."

PREACHING

Avoid preaching, philosophizing, or anything that smacks of lecturing. Nobody likes being lectured. I'm all for pictures with messages, but let the events of the story imply the message: if the theme is voiced, do it in character and with style.

When Rick says, "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," he sounds like Rick and is pursuing his goal of getting Ilsa on the plane.

How dreary if he had said, "You see, Ilsa, man must sacrifice when fighting world fascism." The line that Rick speaks feels like it's in pursuit of the character's goals, not the writer's, so Rick is a person and not a writer's mouthpiece. Drama exists to show characters—and ideas—in action. The ideas inhere in the action. Those ideas can only be spoken aloud when the dialogue is, as it should be, a form of dramatic action: something a character does to get something he wants.

PROPER NAMES

It's surprising how seldom people address us by our names in real life. So is it any wonder that it sounds odd in dialogue? There's usually no need for your characters to utter the name of the person being addressed, as in, "Phil, will you rob the bank with me?"

Beginning writers think that this is something they're supposed to do because, after all, the audience needs to remember the character's name. Don't worry about it. In a novel we need to remember the character's name. On the screen we know the character's face.

What was the last movie you saw? Now ask yourself, what was the hero's name? You can't remember because you just came home and said, "And then Tom Cruise did this, and then the bad guy did that."

"HERE'S HOW I FEEL ABOUT—"

"Here's what I—"

"Don't—"

"Stop! I wish to discuss—"

Avoid interrupted lines. Whenever you are tempted to write a line that ends in a dash because the speaker was interrupted, go ahead and write the line. More often than not you'll discover that you interrupted the line because (1) it was going to be banal, lame, or pointless or, worse, (2) you didn't even know what the character was going to say. Beginning writers overuse interrupted lines because they think it's a shortcut to heated conflict. "Hoo-boy, we're having conflict now! The characters can't even

get out a whole sentence!" In rare situations, especially in comedy, interrupted, unfinished lines are essential to the meaning or progress of the piece, but for the most part they're irritating to read and to hear. If it's necessary to direct people to interrupt each other, go ahead and write out the line and add "interrupting" or "overlapping" in the parenthetical of the following speech.

```
                    TYLER
I don't think college is right for me for
a lot of reasons.

                    DUNCAN
            (overlapping)
Don't contradict me! You're going to
state! Period!
```

When you decide to overlap dialogue yet hope that it all will be heard, a trick is to tack a few unneeded words onto the beginnings and ends of the overlapping speeches, as was done in *His Girl Friday*. In the example above, Tyler's unnecessary words "for a lot of reasons" will overlap with Duncan's unnecessary remark "Don't contradict me," but the important parts of their lines will be audible.

SIMULTANEOUS DIALOGUE

Simultaneous dialogue can be done this way:

```
                    CLARA AND OLIVIA
            (simultaneously)
Candy!
```

UNFINISHED SENTENCES . . . AND ELLIPSES

The ellipsis—three periods in a row, indicating a trailing off, a pause, or something "missing"—should be used sparingly. Ellipses can be useful, especially in comedy when you want the

audience to supply the word in their heads, but don't go crazy. If you think you may be using them too much, you are.

As in the case of the interrupted line ended with a dash, the ellipsis is often employed because the writer fears that the actual line would be inane or on the nose.

NAME-CALLING

When writers want to jack up a scene's dramatic temperature, they sometimes resort to name-calling. "You war-mongering brain-dead porcupine bugger!" I'm all in favor of calling everyone horrible names whenever warranted in real life. But once things have degenerated to the point of name-calling in drama we usually have given up all hope of winning our point and are really just going for ego gratification—not persuasion.

NARRATION

I forbid my beginners to use any kind of voice-over narration. Part of the point of writing your first script is to learn the hard business of getting your exposition across in scenes of conflict rather than with novelistic summary. Narration, when used by beginners, is usually a crutch. They're unsure of how to deliver the exposition and clutch at the easy way out. Still, film history contains wonderful examples of the use of narration. When handled correctly it can add a layer of meaning that can be achieved in no other way.

Narration Contradicting the Image

Voice-over narration can work brilliantly when the voiced-over words contradict the image on the screen to comic effect, revealing a character's hypocrisy. In *Singin' in the Rain* Gene Kelly plays a movie star being interviewed on the radio. Asked the secret of his career, he tells a fancy fairy tale about rich parents and private schools while on the screen we see the reality of tap dancing for nickels in a pool hall and getting tossed out by the scruff of his neck. In other words, the narration is a big fat lie, which, of course, is hilarious.

Goodfellas has a spectacular tracking shot of the gangster

hero making an entrance at a nightclub. He looks completely cool, but his voice-over narration bubbles with boyish marvel at the delicious perks of being a made man. The contradiction between his cool behavior on screen and the unguarded wonder of his narration is what makes it fun.

Voice-over should not just describe what we already see on screen—that's redundant.

When narrating action, let the action speak for itself and only use voice-over to add things that the visual doesn't show.

Narration and Temps Perdu

Narration can give a wonderful sense of the relationship between past and present—the hold of "then" on "now." Scout's narration in *To Kill a Mockingbird* aches with nostalgia.

Classic film noirs often employ voice-over narration. Fred MacMurray opens and closes *Double Indemnity* with narration, which the film justifies (makes diagetic) by having him speak it into a Dictaphone as a confession. The use of voice-over in film noir imparts a sense of the past coming back to haunt the present.

Narration for a Documentary Feel

Narrators were used in Hollywood films of the late 1940s and early 1950s to give a documentary feel, but nowadays such a use might feel more like mockumentary.

DIALECT

Writing in dialect is tricky. If people are speaking in dialect, you must write the words they speak. Don't attempt to spell out their mispronunciations phonetically. For instance, the pirate says, "Aye, matey, he's a scoundrel for sure." Those are the words and the actor has to know them. But don't write the pirate's speech as "Aieee, may-teee, he's a scoundrel fer sshoooooor!" It's hard to read. Also, politics figure into this, because for some reason it's always the member of the oppressed group whose dialogue is spelled out phonetically.

JUNK WORDS

"Well," "um," "so-o-o-o-o," "oh," "well," "look," "uh," "I mean," "you know," "listen, man"—these are junk words that writers insert into their dialogue, often as the first word in a speech, under the mistaken impression that the dialogue plays better because it's more conversational. In fact, junk words usually sabotage dialogue. Cut 96 percent of them.

Wrong: Look, you've always been a jerk.

Right: You've always been a jerk.

DIALOGUE AT A GLANCE

Dialogue isn't conversation. Characters talk because they're trying to get something—get you to think they're nice or get you to rob a bank, but everything is said with purpose. Sometimes you want the purpose to be hidden to avoid being on the nose.

In good dialogue each speech is a link in a chain, firmly connected to the speech immediately before it and the speech that immediately follows. This creates a sense of continuity and linearity—an unbroken hold on the audience's attention.

Dialogue has more bounce when you limit yourself to one point per speech.

When you find yourself making the same point repeatedly in a single speech, pick one way of saying it—the one that's least on the nose.

Voice-over narration used to clarify exposition is cheap, easy, and amateurish, but in special instances voice-over can add mood, resonance, or comedy.

Don't forget to use contractions.

Abstain from junk words.

Avoid preaching, but saying the theme aloud is fine *if* a character does it in pursuit of a goal, does it in character, and does it with style.

MOST COMMON FIRST-DRAFT STYLISTIC ERRORS AT A GLANCE

In order of importance:

- too much summary or narrating as though it were a novel: "The waitress delivers the drinks and takes their orders for dinner."
- too-wordy dialogue.
- employing "monster talk."
- not reporting events in the order they occur; convoluted wording in the description.
- using too many "is" verbs (present progressive tense) in description; use the present tense.
- overuse of junk words.
- misspellings: the usual suspects: "OK," "TV," "dining room," "their" versus "there," and "yeah."
- failing to set off the name of the person being addressed with a comma. Correct: "You know, Tom, that's not your car."
- run-on sentences in the descriptions: not breaking separate thoughts into separate sentences.

MISCELLANY

You now know most of what you need to write a script. But here's a grab bag of key principles that don't fit neatly into previous chapters. They're helpful and in some cases crucial.

WRITER'S GOALS VERSUS CHARACTER'S GOALS

Writers get into trouble when it becomes obvious that the characters are doing things for the convenience of the writer rather than out of their own true motivation as characters. When something feels forced or cheap, when people say the plot "creaks," it's almost always this problem.

Any scene has two kinds of goals: the writer's goals and the character's goals. The audience doesn't care what the writer wants. In fact, if something happens because the writer wants it but doesn't bother to make it emerge from the characters pursuing their goals, audiences will resent it. They dislike being taken out of the story by slipshod construction. They don't want to see the writer's hand and don't want to see things happen too easily.

The Writer Wants to Reveal Character

Say the writer's goal is to let the audience know about Penelope's awful childhood. Writers concerned only with their own needs might have Penelope, over cocktails, start blathering about the past for no good reason. But writers who understand that characters have their own goals will give Penelope a good reason to reveal the information that is related to getting what she wants in the moment. For example, perhaps Penelope's lover accuses her of being spoiled, of having had things her own way too much.

That would give her a reason to tell him about her childhood—to argue that she's far from spoiled and to use the facts of her childhood as evidence, thus accomplishing her own purpose and the writer's purpose simultaneously, which is how it must be.

The Writer Wants to Sound Clever

Writers' goals often trump character goals in overwritten dialogue. The writer is eager to show how clever she is, so her speeches are long, wordy, or simply extraneous. Scenes twist this way and that to accommodate the various inspirations, witticisms, and turns of phrase that the writer can't bear to lose. When the writer thinks more about shoehorning her clever ideas into the speeches than about how this specific character would accomplish his particular goal in this given moment, the results are awkward and self-conscious. The listener gets the idea that the writer is in love with her own voice. In fact, the poor writer is just trying to write "good dialogue" and senses that the lines aren't working—she just doesn't understand *why*. She doesn't realize that characters sound awkward and inane when they talk just to be clever or fill space rather than in pursuit of a goal. The clever lines that you have to cut will invariably be some of your best—that's why you included them in the first place, even though you knew on some level that they didn't fit. They were so inspired that you couldn't resist them. They were your darlings. They must die.

The Writer Wants to Include Some Irrelevant Effect or Incident

When things happen for no reason, aren't a result of cause and effect, or don't feel "earned," very often it's because the writer wanted something to happen (a scene, effect, or event) but didn't bother to construct a chain of events in which the characters, pursuing their goals, led to it happening.

This kind of construction makes the viewer feel yanked around. The writer had some effect or image that he couldn't let go and found it impossible to twist the story around to catch it. That's the tail wagging the dog: an unimportant detail making the whole submit to it instead of the other way around.

The Writer Wants to Deliver Exposition

Another occasion when the writer's goal trumps the characters' goals is a scene early in the film that isn't really moving the story forward—it's just there to "introduce" a hero, a group of characters, or a situation: pure exposition. Exposition is necessary, but the plot shouldn't stop for it. Keep your characters pursuing clear goals in scenes of conflict and let the exposition take care of itself. It will, if you chose your conflicts carefully. The moment when the character just "happens to mention" some piece of exposition that the writer wants to get onto the table (slipping it in) is a prime example of the writer's goal trumping the character's goal. "As you know, I spent four years in prison." Why would a character ever have the goal of telling another character something that he knows the other character already knows? Because it's the writer's goal, not the character's.

The Writer Wants a Change of Heart

People don't just change their minds in movies. Something happens to make them do so. That something could be small, but it has to be in the movie. The object of the hero's desire can't just suddenly say, "What have I been thinking—I *do* love you, hero!" Maybe she gets a piece of information that makes it clear that she's misjudged her suitor, or maybe he stands outside her window with a boom box playing a love song. But whatever causes a change of heart, it has to be in the movie and we have to see cause and effect—otherwise it's unmotivated.

The Writer Wants a Happy Ending

What is *deus ex machina* if not an unearned happy ending? It just happens for no reason, arbitrarily, rather than emerging logically from the events of the story. *Deus ex machina* is a happy ending that results from the writer's goal and not the character's goal.

HOW TO ACHIEVE UNITY AND INTEGRATION?

Have you ever heard people talk about the "classic unities of time, place, and action"? Today that means compactness, compression, integration, and simplicity.

Unity is when all the elements in the piece fit together into a single linear story, with nothing extraneous. Everything serves the story, and events are in the only order they *can* be in.

Integration is when all the elements in the piece are one; it's the elegant simplicity of one element or moment doing more than one thing.

Unity is achieved by leaving out anything that does not propel the story.

Integration results from making whatever is left in work harder.

The Rule of One

Remember how you were encouraged to decide on a single hero and a single goal when constructing the spine? One is the magic number. In drama it's cleaner, stronger, clearer, and more effective to stick to one example, one motivation for one action, one theme, maybe even one characteristic per character (e.g., Lady Macbeth). One strong choice is better than a multitude of lesser choices. Decide.

Give one clear reason for every action. Not a lot of vague reasons, not two so-so ones. Single motivations give drama clarity and a sense of cause and effect that welds the story into a chain of events. Choose the hero who becomes a vigilante because the criminals killed his parents, not the vigilante who believes strongly in justice, and the villain is very rude, and someone has to do it, and I'm not doing anything on Tuesday anyway . . .

Use one strong action to establish a characteristic. Pick a single distinct action to demonstrate your villain's evil, preferably something that he does early on, like stab a blonde to death in a shower.

In showing us someone's nature, don't show us a string of little things—just the final straw. A woman's husband might belittle her for twenty-five years, but one last incident will push her over the edge. That's the moment to dramatize. Forget the rest—the last straw will stand for the rest.

The great thing about the Rule of One is that it forces you to make focused, definite choices—moments that click—and thus

keeps you from being mushy and vague. Simplification will not make your script simple-minded but firm, decisive, and clear, the kind of simplicity that is bought with hard work and mastery. This is the simplicity of Henri Matisse or Pablo Picasso. Or of Hitchcock, in whose films the legendary critic Andrew Sarris found "simplicity . . . on so many levels that the total effect is vertiginously complex" (*The American Cinema*). The simplicity of a good script doesn't come easily. To make every moment work on every level—plot, characterization, theme, style—takes thought, planning, and work. It is best achieved by being rigorous in your passion to simplify, reduce, and integrate—to make every element do several things at once. The step outline helps a lot.

Double Duty

Fewer elements mean more jobs for each individual element. A really integrated screenplay has fewer elements doing more. When considering solutions for problems in dramatic writing, remember that the best solution is the one that solves two (or more) problems at once. Think of actions or details that do more than one thing: the villain throwing acid in a pretty girl's face not only shows us what a dog-kicking swine of a villain he is but also provides a personal motivation for a policeman on the case, if the girl was his sister.

Combining Characters, Combining Duties

Having fewer characters means that the writer has more time to create depth and audience interest in each individual one. That is not to say that the creation of marvelous minor characters who come and go is undesirable (watch Federico Fellini, Sergei Eisenstein, and Preston Sturges for examples of unforgettable walk-ons). In general, however, having fewer characters means more audience interest in each character and in the story overall.

If you find that your hero needs a confidant, it might be better to give that function to a character already in the story rather than inventing a whole new character. Fewer characters are easier for the audience to keep straight, and we develop a stronger emotional attachment. The more time we spend with

a character, the more we care. A side benefit to combining characters is that you end up with interestingly complex characters.

Integration of Objects

Make objects do many kinds of work. An example is the cigarette lighter in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*. The film begins when Guy Haines meets a stranger on a train who asks him for a light. Guy proffers his lighter, emblazoned with his trademark—crossed tennis racquets. Bruno looks at the tennis rackets then up at Guy's face and asks, "Aren't you Guy Haines, the tennis player?" Bruno has read in the society column how Guy would like to divorce his wife and marry the stunning daughter of a senator. Bruno suggests that they "trade murders": Guy will kill Bruno's rich father, and Bruno will slay Guy's inconvenient wife. Guy thinks that Bruno is making a tasteless joke, which rattles him so much that he flees the railroad car without his lighter. Bruno realizes that he still has the lighter but decides against chasing after Guy. His desire to maintain a connection with Guy makes him keep the object.

Later, when Guy won't keep the "bargain" that he didn't really make, Bruno decides to frame Guy for the murder of his wife by planting his cigarette lighter, with its distinctive crossed tennis racquets, at the amusement park where Bruno killed Guy's wife. As long as Bruno has the lighter, he controls Guy's identity. He meets Guy because of the lighter and blackmails Guy with the lighter. In the end Guy regains control of his identity by getting his lighter back. In a way the whole movie is about getting it back. That cigarette lighter is a wonderful example of an object that turns up over and over again throughout a narrative, performing multiple functions on multiple levels. It's a thread woven throughout the film, binding it together and creating integration: its crossed tennis racquets even play into the film's visual "crisscross" motif.

Lines of Dialogue with Multiple Meanings

"Aren't you Guy Haines?"

So asks Bruno when he meets Guy on the train. It's an utterly

banal remark, plainly utilitarian in its two functions of soliciting a piece of information while initiating a conversation with a stranger. Yet the film gradually reveals that this question isn't so simple. What does it mean to be Guy Haines? Is the "real" Guy his murderous id or his virtuous superego? Is he morally responsible for acts of evil that he doesn't commit but wished to see done in the dankest recesses of his heart? At the very end of the film, when Guy is once again on a train, a sweet old minister innocently inquires, "Aren't you Guy Haines?" Guy and his girlfriend look at each other with alarm and flee the railroad car without another word. It's a circular reference to the film's beginning and also a joke, but on another level it's a final comment on the film's theme of identity. Are you Guy Haines? Are you Guy Haines again? Have you retaken possession of your identity and your lighter? What does it mean to say you're Guy Haines? Hitchcock freighted seemingly simple dialogue with multiple levels of meaning and an everyday object with life and death significance.

The Platonic Ideal of Integration

An exquisite example of narrative integration occurs near the end of *Rear Window*. Jimmy Stewart is Jeff Jeffries, a globetrotting photographer who's busted his leg shooting a car race from the middle of the track. Stuck in a wheelchair, he can't leave his apartment, so he spends his days peering across the courtyard into his neighbors' windows. His nurse and his girlfriend think he's turning into a "Peeping Tom," a point that Hitchcock underlines by having Jeff suggestively stroke his long, phallic camera lens. (Really, look for the moment, it's hilarious and I swear it's there.)

Lisa, his girlfriend, wants to get married. The audience thinks that Jeff is a nut to resist because she's Grace Kelly, the ultimate upper-class blonde. Jeff thinks that they're incompatible because she's a spoiled Park Avenue fashion plate, while he's rugged and eats fish heads in the jungle. "I need a woman who's willing to go anywhere and do anything and love it."

The Peeping Tom motif is deepened by the way in which the neighbors that he spies on embody erotic situations that illus-

trate possible outcomes of his romance with Lisa. For example, a musician who lives alone is composing a song; he's what Jeff might be if he doesn't marry Lisa—a life dedicated solely to art. An unmarried older woman whom Jeff dubs Miss Lonelyhearts represents what could happen to Lisa if she doesn't snag Jeff. And there are couples: the childless middle-aged marrieds who fuss over their dog; a lusty pair of newlyweds; and the Thorwalds, who bicker bitterly.

When Mrs. Thorwald disappears, Jeff suspects that Thorwald (Raymond Burr) killed her. The cops don't buy it, but Lisa does. She and Jeff investigate. Thus *Rear Window* develops two intertwined plots simultaneously: Lisa's romantic pursuit of Jeff and Jeff's pursuit of the killer, aided by Lisa.

Jeff and Lisa reckon that if Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring is in her apartment then she must have been murdered, because no married woman would go off on a trip without her wedding ring. To find the ring is to solve the crime. While Thorwald is out, Lisa impulsively decides to break into his apartment by daringly scaling the fire escape.

But Thorwald comes home sooner than expected and catches Lisa in his apartment. We can't hear anything but see it all through the window in pantomime from Jeff's Peeping Tom point of view across the courtyard: Lisa seems to be explaining how she ended up in the wrong apartment—Thorwald grabs her and throws her to the ground—the light goes out—is he strangling her?! Jeff calls the police. Thorwald has Lisa, and Jeff can do nothing.

Suddenly the police are knocking at Thorwald's door. The light comes back up. Lisa gets off the floor. Again in pantomime we see Lisa, cool as the other side of the pillow, talking to the police. With her back to the window, she flutters her left hand for Jeff to see.

There! We see Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring on Lisa's ring finger. Lisa has found it and cleverly slipped it on. In a single close-up the crime is solved and Lisa wins Jeff. In pointing at the wedding band placed on her own ring finger Lisa signals a message that the audience understands perfectly: "I burglarized the

apartment, I found the evidence, I hid it in the cleverest place in the world, I faced down the killer, I bamboozled the cops, I proved I'm one spunky girl, and now you have to marry me."

Within a single thunderous moment Hitchcock has simultaneously achieved huge strides in both the mystery plot and the romantic plot, with the one dependent on the other.

Hitchcock had been refining exactly this approach to integration for decades. In his 1927 film *The Lodger* a policeman says, "When I put a rope round the Avenger's neck—I'll put a ring round Daisy's finger," just as the ring around Grace Kelly's finger will put a ring on Jeff's finger and a noose around Thorwald's neck.

PEAKS OF EMOTION

In screenwriting "jeopardy" means immediate, suspenseful danger, as when Thorwald discovered Lisa in his apartment.

If you want your audience to feel uncomfortable, frightened, or agitated—in suspense—put the character in jeopardy. Whether it represents mortal danger (the crop duster sequence in *North by Northwest*) or danger of social embarrassment, jeopardy guarantees excitement.

The moments of greatest sadness are usually partings. Chaplin loses the kid in *The Kid*. Lillian Gish bids her brother goodbye as he goes off to war in *The Birth of a Nation*. Clark Gable as Rhett Butler walks out on Vivian Leigh as Scarlett at the very moment when she has at last realized she loves him. The film ends with the most famous line in film history: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Reunions are the cinema's moments of greatest joy: for example, when Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey returns home to his family a healed man at the end of *It's A Wonderful Life* or when Kevin Costner meets his father in *Field of Dreams*.

The Clock

Also called a "time lock," a clock is some deadline by which a task needs to be done to avoid consequences. At the end of *The Gradu-*

ate Ben has to race to the church to stop Elaine's wedding; if he doesn't arrive in time she'll be married and it'll be too late. (In a brilliant comic twist unprecedented in American film history, he does arrive after she's married—and she still runs off with him!)

In *A Christmas Story* Christmas morning is the clock.

Near the end of *Goldfinger* Bond is handcuffed to a nuclear bomb. The seconds tick away—he has to disarm the device before the timer reaches zero.

A clock adds pressure and suspense and turns a scene or even an entire film into a race. In *D.O.A.* Edmond O'Brien has been dosed with slow-acting poison and has 24 hours to solve his own murder! Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

TONE, GENRE, AND VOICE

One result of following the advice in this book might be finding your own authentic voice and creating a script that reflects your unique response to your personal experience of human life.

Imitating other writers and films can be helpful, but it can also be a detour in your growth as an artist. There's a difference between appreciating how another artist solved a plotting problem and trying to appropriate another artist's soul (or, worse, appropriating moments from great films and trying to shoehorn them into yours when something that grows organically out of your own plot of characters would fit better).

Do you have a unique point of view? A distinctive way of thinking? What's special about the way you talk or exceptional in your perspective on the world? The best dramatic writers often have a voice, style, or tone all their own. Find yours and use it.

Choose a story to suit your style. No one can write everything. I'd hate to see Arthur Miller try farce and don't think that John Waters will be writing for the Hallmark Hall of Fame anytime soon. Fortunately, each discovered his own unique brilliance.

When some writers try to write drama, it comes out comedy. If that's you, go with it. In a letter to Anne, Countess of Ossory, Horace Walpole observed, "The world is a comedy to those that think; a tragedy to those that feel." Which are you?

Tone

Tone is a hard word to pin down. "A manner of . . . writing . . . that shows a certain attitude on the part of the . . . writer," says the dictionary. Tone encompasses voice, mood, atmosphere, spirit, style, flavor, and "feel." Tone can be dark, light, heavy, black, bright, somber, grisly, sultry, courtly, raw, violent, bubbly, frothy, loopy, wacky, zany, Victorian, sentimental, hard-boiled, disturbing, and so on. The films of Robert Aldrich (*Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* and *Kiss Me Deadly*) have a hysterical, neurotic tone. *A Man For All Seasons* is stately. *The Elephant Man* has a certain ominous biliousness, while Ingmar Bergman films are often bleakly, coldly clinical. The MGM musicals written by Betty Comden and Adolph Green such as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band Wagon* are light, playful, and sophisticated; Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* is romantic, epic, and operatic, and Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* is tender and elegiac. Films based on the work of Noël Coward are witty and brittle, and the films of Preston Sturges (*The Lady Eve, Palm Beach Story*) deftly balance winking cynicism with knowing humanism. *Animal House* and *Bachelor Party* are exuberantly coarse, and Anthony Asquith's adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is dryly arch. *North by Northwest* and *Charade* are stylish romps.

TONE IS RELATED TO GENRE

Tone can also be described with terms that relate to genre: comic, dramatic, melodramatic, screwball, farcical, satirical, spoofy, noirish, blackly comic, picaresque, and so on.

Sometimes tone can be described with reference to a particular artist. *Far from Heaven* is often described as "Sirkian," in reference to Douglas Sirk, the 1950s director of stylishly soapy yet subversive melodramas aimed at women.

When Hollywood executives ask about tone they sometimes mean, "What movie that's already a hit does this resemble?"

SHOULD TONE BE CONSISTENT?

Tone and style are matters of taste, and tastes change from generation to generation. All drama is to some degree stylized

and artificial: this year's "last word in realism" becomes the following generation's campfest. The once-admired, deadly serious "Great Man Biographies" of the 1930s now seem infinitely inferior to the frothy screwball comedies of the same era, and Douglas Sirk's melodramas starring Rock Hudson are now held in far higher critical esteem than the socially conscious "problem pictures" that were deemed to be obviously superior in the 1950s. It is therefore hard to make rules about style and tone.

Some would argue that tone should be consistent throughout the work. For example, the mixing of comedy and drama was anathema to Aristotle. Now it is common to have comedy and drama delicately balanced in one piece, with the term "dramedy" used to describe films such as *Broadcast News*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *Crash*. Leo McCarey's *An Affair to Remember* segues gracefully from light romantic comedy to melodrama. Some films have even managed to veer abruptly or wildly from one tone to another; for example, *Life Is Beautiful*, starring Roberto Begnini, one minute is a light romantic comedy and the next the grimmest of dramas set in a Nazi concentration camp. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and even *Much Ado about Nothing* all mix moods in a confusing way that creates challenges in staging them.

Still, most artistically successful films find a tone and stick to it. Inconsistency and uncertainty of tone can be serious flaws. If you're going to switch tones, do it consciously and with clear artistic intent.

And remember, there's a difference between delicately balancing two tones throughout a piece (the bittersweet comedy of Anton Chekhov, for example) and recklessly or fecklessly bouncing around among varying tones.

CONGRUITY OF STYLE AND CONTENT

Your style and your content should probably be in accord. For example, a long, serious drama about a well-adjusted child's temporary disappointment at not getting the Christmas present he wanted will cause audiences to feel that your tone is too serious and heavy for the material. It might even be laughable. A light,

fluffy, sticky-sweet romantic comedy about cannibalism and dismemberment might not work; a more blackly comic tone might be more appropriate, as in the milestone indie *Eating Raoul*.

It is possibly true that the more realistic your piece is, the more able it is to encompass variations in tone, whereas the more stylized and "artificial" it is, the more important consistency of tone becomes. And I'm not knocking artificiality, a word that pertains to works ranging from *The Wizard of Oz* to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Anything that's especially stylish or stylized is artificial to a degree. A lot of things that seemed quite realistic in their day seem artificial now.

WHAT OTHER FILMS HAVE A TONE SIMILAR TO YOURS?

It might be useful to come up with a few words to describe the tone of your film or, perhaps easier, identify films that are "like" yours. Being true to yourself and your experiences will often lead to a unique work of art, but after all we don't exist in a cultural vacuum. Humans have written dramatic narratives for over 2,000 years. It's likely that your voice and *Weltanschauung* resemble some that have come before you. An activity that I sometimes suggest to students (but only after they've completed their first acts) is to name three films that have a similar tone to theirs. If they can't do it—that's OK! Obviously, you're unique.

Thinking about Genre

According to the critic Barry Keith Grant in *Film Genres*, "Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen." Myriad genres, subgenres, and genre combinations exist: suspense thriller, horror, horror comedy, romantic comedy, western, musical, science fiction, kung fu, and on and on.

Genre can be a terrible trap, especially for young, movie-loving students of exceptional intelligence and low self-confidence.

It seems tempting for a variety of reasons, but the demands of genre distract and detour the writer. It's hard enough to craft a logically consistent, motivated story, but it gets even harder when you're trying to include the dictatorial demands of genre. You have to create believable characters and come up with plausible actions to achieve their goals—while making a ghost jump out and say, "boo!" every ten minutes. If those demands conflict, which do you choose? The organic story development or the ghost? You're serving two masters. It's a balancing act that's hard enough for an experienced screenwriter, never mind a beginner, so it's best to steer clear for the time being.

Still, if what you intend to write just happens to fall into an established genre or can easily be nudged into it—fine! Genre can certainly be a selling point.

HANDLING THE DYNAMITE OF GENRE

Many screenwriters sooner or later have to deal with genre. What pitfalls should be avoided?

Don't use genre as your starting point, at least for your first script. Decide on story and character, construct your spine, and only then perhaps give thought to what genre it represents. Don't say "I want to write a romantic comedy" and then start coming up with characters and plots. Decide instead to do a piece on how you met your boyfriend and then give some thought to whether it fits into the romantic comedy genre. In other words, you're going to write a *particular* movie, not a *type* of movie. Start from what you know about the world.

Don't let genre considerations override dramatic logic. The temptation is always to do the genre convention—to borrow the scene, situation, or character that's already in the tradition. Too often that choice is at odds with the logic of *your* story and characters. Come up with your own solutions to dramatic problems that suit the specific characters and story you have chosen. Don't attempt to "graft on" scenes and incidents from other films in the same genre. The result will be awkward, disintegrated, and forced.

Don't be afraid to deviate from genre conventions. As Professor Richard Walter at UCLA always pointed out, the genre films that are remembered are the ones that reinvent the genre.

Here are some tips regarding a few particularly tricky genres.

THE FIVE SITUATIONS OF ROMANTIC COMEDY

The important thing to understand about romantic comedies is that, like all stories, they must have conflict. In a love story this almost always means that one character wants to have a love affair while the other does not, including a pursuit or chase. If both characters want to be in love, where's the problem? You've heard the expression "Boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back." In all three of those states—getting, losing, getting back—the girl isn't his. Love stories that work are usually about two people, only one of whom is in love.

I love you but you hate me (*The Shop around the Corner, You've Got Mail, 10 Things I Hate about You, Groundhog Day*, and *Rushmore*).

I love you but you don't believe in love (*Breakfast at Tiffany's, [500] Days of Summer, Much Ado about Nothing*, and Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*, where the heroine is a Marxist who thinks love is a bourgeois frivolity).

I love you but you think you love someone else or at least are involved with someone else (*The Wedding Planner*, *Sabrina*, *The Apartment*, *The Awful Truth*, and *His Girl Friday*, with Ralph Bellamy in his usual "someone else" role and Rosalind Russell thinking that she loves him when we know she'll end up with Cary Grant).

I love you, but I'm pretending to be someone I'm not (or mistaken for someone else or in disguise), which complicates my pursuit of you (*City Lights*, *The Lady Eve*, *There's Something about Mary*, *While You Were Sleeping*, *Tootsie*, *Sorority Boys*, *Some Like It Hot*, and in fact virtually all cross-dressing comedies).

We hate each other but are forced together and come to love each other, over the course of pursuing another goal, often adventurous (*It Happened One Night* and *Romancing the Stone*).

In romantic *dramas* the lovers often agree to love each other

at an early stage, but some outside force keeps them apart (the feuding families in *Romeo and Juliet*) or some problem in the relationship threatens to separate them (alcoholism in *The Days of Wine and Roses*).

It has been said that you write a love story by starting out with two people that you can't imagine together and by the end of the picture you can't imagine them apart. It has also been said, however, that in classic screwball comedies we know that the pair should be together because they laugh and play together like children, money and practicality be damned. Those two pieces of advice seem contradictory to me, so take your pick.

SATIRE

Satire is the harsh mocking of the great and powerful or of social ills: for example, *Network*, *The Player*, and *Thank You for Smoking*. Some satires live forever, but most don't. Playwright George S. Kaufman, who wrote some satires, nevertheless famously defined satire as "What closes Saturday night" (*George S. Kaufman and His Friends* by Scott Meredith).

Comedy itself often has a shelf life. Horace Walpole wrote in a 1777 letter to Robert Jephson: "A tragedy can never suffer by delay: a comedy may, because the allusions or the manners represented in it may be temporary." In other words, the culture a comedy refers to may disappear over time. Satire, which is often topical, has the shortest of shelf lives and today has to compete with television and the Internet, which can satirize today's news tonight. If you have a comic sensibility, by all means use it. The world needs laughs desperately, but topicality and satire may be risky. Comedy that emerges from human foibles that are timeless—hypocrisy, pretentiousness, disproportionate emotions, vulgar behavior—has a better chance of standing the test of time, like the works of Charlie Chaplin, Preston Sturges, W. C. Fields, and Billy Wilder.

THE WHODUNIT

The classic detective mystery story is an enormously complex type of narrative and requires the most planning of all. The rea-

son for its daunting complexity is that a detective story is really two complete, separate narratives that must function perfectly in tandem. The first narrative is that of the crime itself. The murderer and victim have some relationship. That relationship leads to the formation of a murder plan. The murder is committed and covered up. All or almost all of this first "hidden" narrative (the crime) takes place before the film even begins or in any case out of sight of the audience. It's usually backstory.

Narrative number two, the story we actually see in the film, is the story of a detective uncovering narrative number one. It begins with the discovery of a corpse. We then watch the detective pursue the goal of catching the murderer, which emphasizes the uncovering of clues that allow the detective to piece together narrative number one. Therefore the writer not only has to make both narratives make sense but has to make them make sense in relation to each other.

CHARACTER

Because human beings are social animals, "reading" the behavior of other members of the tribe offers a tremendous evolutionary advantage. Therefore character will come naturally to most writers, but your sense of it can be sharpened. We've talked elsewhere in this book about the importance of tactics and goals in defining character. Here are some other issues.

Strong Characters Who Know What They Want

It helps if you start with active, strong-willed characters who know what they want and go after it. Passive, weak-willed characters who don't know what they want, don't take action, or aren't resourceful are tricky to write.

Dramatic Characters Often Embody a Single Characteristic

Characters can be complex, contradictory, and subtle, but they often embody a single virtue or vice. Othello is jealous. Puck is puckish. Rudy in *Rudy* is sheer, dogged persistence in pursuit of a dream. Melanie in *Gone with the Wind* just couldn't be any nicer.

The Myth of the Pet the Dog Scene

The expression "pet the dog scene" refers to the old screenwriting adage "the hero pets the dog and the villain kicks the dog," which means that we know the goodness or badness of a character by his actions. Absolutely true!

However, some people believe that early in the script you're permitted one scene that exposes the hero's character and does not move the plot forward—a sort of dramaturgical get-out-of-jail-free card. No. Expose your hero's character in a scene of conflict that moves the story forward. Purely expository scenes are boring no matter where in the script they occur.

Too Many Characters

Making art is about making choices. A movie is only so long. One mistake that beginning writers sometimes make is having too many characters. A large cast of characters is easier to keep track of on the screen than on the page because we'll put faces to them, but it's tiresome when the writer just whips up a new character every time something new needs to be done. And it's impossible to have too *few* characters; even a one-person show can be an engaging movie, as in the case of Robert Altman's *Secret Honor*, Spaulding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, and Julia Sweeney's *God Said Ha!*

Names Shouldn't Be Too Meaningful

The Restoration is over, and with it went Mrs. Malaprop, the woman who ever uttered malapropisms. Too-literal names remind us that we're watching a work of fiction and undermine the suspension of disbelief.

Give Spear Carriers Names When Possible

No one can keep straight a conversation between two characters named "Cop #3" and "Cop #5." Something like "Handsome Cop" and "Red-Faced Cop" is better. Make "Billy's Mom" into "Vicky" if she has even two lines. A name makes the character easier for the reader (and actor) to imagine.

A Strong Villain, Yes, But How Villainous?

Hitchcock said, "The stronger your villain, the stronger your story." He meant that strong opposition to the hero makes a story exciting and suspenseful. The villain or antagonist, if there is one, needs to be powerful in opposition to the hero.

However, the hero's opposition or antagonist need not be villainous in the sense of being evil or wrong. In many sophisticated films the hero's antagonist is as human and sympathetic as the hero. For example, in Jean Renoir's antiwar masterpiece *Grand Illusion* the German prison camp commander Captain von Rauffenstein is no less human than his French captive Captain de Boeldieu. Even in cases where there's an old-fashioned villain out to destroy the world, the audience doesn't necessarily have to dislike the villain. In the Tim Burton version of *Batman*, a popcorn movie if ever there was one, the Joker is tremendously likable and charming. Utterly bad mustache-twirling meanies such as the English king in *Braveheart* or Scar in *The Lion King* can be dramatically effective but can also seem a little corny. As the French proverb says, "To understand all is to forgive all." In a similar vein Jean Renoir said in *The Rules of the Game*, "Everybody has his reasons." And Hemingway said, "As a writer you should not judge. You should understand" (*By-Line Ernest Hemingway: Selected Articles and Dispatches of Four Decades*).

Truly humanistic art knows that everyone is human, which is why psychologists have discovered that reading Chekhov increases empathy in human test subjects. If the art of dramatic writing has utility, that is probably it.

It's easy to make people look "strange" if you hide their reasons from us. But the moment you reveal their motivations they are humanized and therefore more interesting and sympathetic. That is why Renoir's *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* and Fritz Lang's *M*, in which murderers are portrayed with understanding, are more noteworthy and profound than *Natural Born Killers* and *Blood Simple*.

Depicting Minorities

The artist must resist being tyrannized by intellectual fashion but must also be chary of using boring stereotypes. It's much more interesting to write against the grain: give us the senator with dwarfism and the heterosexual choreographer. Remember: movies now have virtual immortality in a great variety of digital windows. You don't want to date your material with social attitudes from the wrong side of history just for the sake of an easy laugh.

Unity in Conflict

All relationships have conflict and obstacles, and no relationship is without friction. Most successful films have some close strong relationship at their center, often between mismatched people. Even when a quest or adventure dominates the film, what concerns the audience is the relationship between the two main characters. Obviously, not all films have strong central relationships; *Citizen Kane* is the story of a man's repeated failures to achieve satisfying intimacy. But many successful films have a strong central relationship. Indeed, the strong bond is why conflict is possible and why it matters.

If we are mismatched, why hang out together? You go your way, I go mine, end of problem. Only now there's no movie. The characters must have a reason why they can't just walk away from each other. The yoking together of two battling people is what some call "unity in conflict." Maybe they're roommates, maybe they work together, or maybe they're related. Often they're married. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Maggie is loving, vital, and strong, while Brick is moody, morbid, and weak. She wants sex, and he wants to withhold it. Why don't they just walk away from each other? They're married. In *Casablanca* why doesn't Ilsa just ignore Rick? Because he has those crazy letters of transit—she *has* to interact with him, which leads to falling in love again. A writer friend of mine was planning a romantic comedy about a city girl and a country boy but couldn't think how to force them together—until he had them inherit the same house at a time when both had no place to live. In *The Enforcer* Detective "Dirty

Harry" Callahan, who believes that women have no place on the force, is assigned a female partner. Assigning a new partner whom the hero dislikes is a standard way of creating unity in conflict and has been done in dozens of movies.

THEME

Aristotle told us that the point of drama was to please and instruct. The lesson that we receive is sometimes called theme. Theme isn't something that's ladled over the script like a sauce. It inheres in the script's bones. Theme is what we learn from the film about how life works. Drama is inherently moral in that it inevitably illustrates something about life and almost inevitably takes an attitude toward characters and their behavior. Drama's lessons won't always be ones that we wish to hear, but themes that disturb us often make for better art.

Theme and Ending

Your ending is where your thematic message is driven home. That's why screenwriters are irked when their endings are altered. If you've seen the romantic comedy *Pretty Woman*, you know that businessman Richard Gere and hooker Julia Roberts wind up together. Theme: "Love triumphs over all." It was good enough for Shakespeare. It's said that in the original spec script, however, they parted at the end, making the theme "Capitalist princes don't pick sex workers as their Cinderellas," a truer and more provocative point. The studio supposedly felt that the audience wouldn't accept an unhappy ending, but in fact some of the cinema's biggest hits have been about doomed love: *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, *Titanic*, *Vertigo*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Then again, *Pretty Woman* grossed almost half a billion dollars and is arguably the biggest hit in the history of the romantic comedy genre, so maybe the studio knew something. The point is that ending often determines theme.

The Big Theme

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre and *The Maltese Falcon* are about greed. *Citizen Kane* is about the American Dream and the myste-

rious opaqueness of other human beings. Those are big themes. Tackling big themes can make your story profound, important, and satisfying. But smaller themes, such as the human foibles found in comedies, are also worth tackling; there's room for all.

First-time screenwriters should not use a theme as their inspiration. Start with character and goal and try not to think about theme until you're well into writing the script. Then look at your story and see if you can identify the statement that it seems to be making about life. As you execute the rest of the first draft and the rewrites, you can sharpen and heighten that theme.

Identifying Your Theme

In looking for theme, a couple of formulas can help guide you. One is to note the moral outcome of the story—how do certain kinds of behavior turn out?

The Woman in the Window: "Crime doesn't pay."

Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: "Crime pays."

Unforgiven: "Vengeance leads only to more vengeance and suffering."

Animal House: "Youthful riotousness and vengeance lead to success later in life."

Chinatown: "The rich big shots who run the world are ruthless and can't be beaten."

Vertigo: "Men are slaves to 'type,' which leads to tragedy."

Blank versus Blank

Another helpful formula is blank versus blank, but don't confuse the thematic conflict with the central conflict in your spine. They're quite different. The central conflict is *dramatic* and defines the two main opposing forces in a dramatic narrative. The *thematic* conflict is about two opposing ideas, qualities, or attitudes:

Seven: "Emotional justice versus rational justice."

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: "Pragmatic vitality versus brooding despair."

Bullets over Broadway: "Natural artistic talent versus pretentious striving."

Often in the blank-versus-blank formulation the thematic conflict mirrors the central dramatic conflict in that each character involved in the central conflict embodies a particular quality. In *Seven* Morgan Freeman practices rational justice while Brad Pitt and the serial killer practice emotional, eye-for-an-eye justice. Two approaches to life are pitted against each other by two contestants.

Certainly not all themes fall into these formulas, which are offered only as helpful templates not rules. Who says that you even have to have a theme? And sometimes we don't know our theme until other people tell us what it is.

TITLES

Titles are tough. They're part of the artistic design, but they're also a sales tool. I'm not happy until I have a title I love. Here are some tips on where to look for titles.

Interesting character names: *Dr. Zhivago*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*.

Evocative place names: *Manhattan*, *Caddy Shack*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

High concepts or hooks: *The Birds*, *Star Wars*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Titanic*.

A poetic phrase from literature or from the script itself: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

On-the-nose titles: *Clerks*, *My Dinner with Andre*, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*.

Indication of genre: *Psycho*, *How the West Was Won*, *Singin' in the Rain*.

My friend Sally the film archivist once said, "A perfect title is evocative yet tells you nothing. It makes you ask a question."

MISCELLANY AT A GLANCE

One of the most important things that a beginning screenwriter must learn is that things don't happen in a script just because writers want them to—they happen as a result of the characters' pursuit of their goals. If writers want exposition then they

have to put the characters into a conflict where they have reason to speak the exposition. If writers want witty dialogue, that dialogue has to be spoken by a character who's pursuing an objective with it. If writers want a character to have a change of heart or mind, something in the script has to cause it.

Movies have no time to waste, so unity and integration are important. Unity means that everything in the script is necessary and is ordered in such a way that the order can't be changed because the plot is advancing. Integration is an elegant simplicity achieved by making one element accomplish two or more purposes: for example, an event that serves not only plot but also theme and character. A strong dramatic structure has fewer elements doing more.

Integration implies the Rule of One, which encourages making choices: picking one incident, object, line, or character and making it work on multiple levels. The choices you made in the spine are examples of the rule of one.

If your work falls into an established genre, fine; but genre should not be your starting point. Genre should not override story logic, and you shouldn't be a slave to it. Genre writing sounds easier but is harder because genre conventions can confuse and subvert you. Still, if the spine you want to write falls into a genre, great.

Be aware of tone and try to be consistent. If your story emerges from your knowledge of life, if you're writing from your heart and what you know, tone will probably fall into place. One way to think about your tone is to identify other movies with the same tone.

Theme is a hard place to start—that's why it isn't in the spine. But take a moment to think about it once you have your story worked out. The ending may give you a clue as to the film's "lesson."

11 THE REWRITE

When you're rushing to flood the page with your gushing inspiration, you obviously want to maintain the momentum and not stop to agonize over niceties.

Now that you've finished your first draft, though, you have the time. Take it. Too often beginning writers, avid for applause, beach cottages, and vintage Bentleys, submit their freshly minted first drafts without so much as a spell check. But industry contacts will never read you again if you show them half-baked stuff. Even friends and colleagues from whom you solicit criticism deserve to see a script after you have made every improvement that you can manage on your own. It's a rude waste of people's time to make them identify errors that you knew were there and didn't bother to fix. The most irritating thing of all is when you start reading a script that someone's given you and the writer suddenly calls up and says, "Hey—have you started that script? Because I just finished a new draft that's way better."

"Oh, really? I'm so glad to hear that because my time has no value whatsoever." Click.

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

Rewriting is crucial, yet some writers avoid it because it forces us to face the pain of seeing flaws in our work. If we have insecurities, and who doesn't, we may find ourselves magnifying and obsessing over our errors, seeing only the ugly flaws and not the beautiful whole. Cognitive therapists emphasize "Hear the whole message." If I say to a student, "The script is fantastic, I worship it, but the third act needs work," sometimes what they hear is

"Third act terrible . . . terrible . . . terrible . . . script a complete failure . . . failure . . . failure."

So the writer just shuts down and rather than calmly looking for things to improve tumbles into a spiral of anxiety that prevents seeing the work objectively—as a predominantly excellent thing with a few flaws. The anxiety keeps any work at all from being done—or, worse, causes the writer recklessly to change everything, including what's good.

The key here is to remember that the script is not you. Its flaws aren't flaws in your character.

Also, keep in mind that thinking "It'll never be good and I'll never be good enough to fix it" is a form of thinking about the outcome. We just want to enjoy writing, which means forgetting outcome.

Another issue with rewriting is that some people don't find it as exciting and rewarding as writing the first draft. The gains may seem small, scattered, and slow in coming. There's a saying that I love: "The last 10 percent of anything is very expensive to achieve." That's especially true in cases where the writer successfully engaged in extensive planning and therefore achieved a structurally sound first draft that's nine-tenths there. The painstaking effort of achieving that final tenth might not at first seem like a big deal, yet sweet, quiet satisfactions can be had from the rewriting process—fastidious pleasures for the artisan's soul. After all, the last 10 percent is the difference between A– and A+ work.

COOL OFF

Once you've finished your script, lay it aside to cool off. Come back to it when you've got some objectivity. For most of us, that's about two weeks. For me, when I was younger, it could be six years. I was nuts. Anyway, once you've calmed down and gotten some distance, it's time to start the rewrite.

REFRESH YOUR MEMORY ABOUT TECHNIQUE

Go back to the "don'ts" of good writing and refresh your memory. In fact, rereading this whole book wouldn't be a bad idea. A

lot of concepts that you thought you understood the first time through you will understand much more profoundly now that you've actually written a script. By the way—congratulations on finishing a script.

TAKE A SURGICAL APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENTS

It's just as important to protect what's good as to change what doesn't work. Writers often panic, irrationally lose confidence in their material, and slash and burn willy-nilly, destroying the original, fresh, and inspired along with what's sloppy or clumsy. It's easier to be surgical if you've let the script cool off.

LET GO

The ideal is to let go of what truly doesn't work while not making changes just for the sake of change. Know precisely why you're making every choice. Don't be afraid to change or cut even your most darling scenes and effects if they do not serve the whole. If it doesn't work, let it go, and trust your own limitless creativity to come up with something even better to replace it. The smartest writers are those who discard something ruthlessly and decisively once they have determined that it needs to go.

STRONG PLOTTING, FLAWED DIALOGUE

If your script has good plotting but flawed dialogue, that's good news in that you won't need a page-one rewrite.

By the way, a lot of scripts get by with dialogue that's merely serviceable; it's the story and the characters that hold the audience. What's more, even the worst dialogue can often be made acceptable if you cut it to the bone. Consult the chapter on dialogue for further advice.

FLAWED PLOTTING, STRONG DIALOGUE

If it turns out your script has brilliant dialogue and flawed plotting, that's good news in that it means you have an ear, which is a gift. But structural problems are harder to fix. A script with deep plot issues needs more than a superficial pass through the

computer—no amount of polish will solve them. Fiddling with the dialogue in a case like that is just rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. You may have to tackle the dreaded page-one rewrite, or, perhaps better, take what you've learned and move on to the next idea. If you *do* tackle a page-one rewrite, know that it may be as much work as starting a completely new script or even more, so it's up to you. But even a script that you abandon is not "wasted" if you have learned from it and loved writing it.

Every new script you start is being started by a better writer.

GO BACK TO YOUR SPINE

First, evaluate whether the script told the story you set out to tell in the first place. Where's that spine? If you don't know where you've put it that could have something to do with how the script went astray.

Does the focus stay on the hero?

Does the hero clearly establish a goal early and pursue it throughout, decisively winning it or losing in the end?

Do we care? Do we understand how much the hero wants to achieve the goal?

Is the central question raised, kept alive, and then answered as late as possible?

Is the conflict that you identified in your original spine really the central conflict?

Did you play your hook? Did you give audiences what they came out on a rainy night to see?

If you've considerably strayed from your spine, it can be an enormous task to bring the story back into line with your original concept. It may entail throwing out most of the script, and that's perhaps too disheartening to contemplate. Therefore, if possible, what you perhaps want to do in some cases is to accept the direction that you have actually taken and refine it. If you didn't tell the story you set out to tell, then what story did you tell? Can you find a workable spine within the draft you wrote? Perhaps you want to choose that as your new spine and bend your rewriting efforts toward it.

CUTTING ON THE MACRO LEVEL

The most important, and easiest, thing you can do in the rewriting process is cutting.

Start by cutting whole scenes, sections of scenes, and even groups of scenes. Cut characters. Cut subplots.

To do this you'll need an up-to-date step outline in front of you. It will serve as the map that reveals whether your route through the territory was indeed the right one and will help you to determine on a step-by-step basis which scenes are dispensable and where you might have gone off course.

Eliminate all steps that aren't necessary. Very often we think that audiences are slower than they are—that they need everything spelled out. Think of each scene as a dot and understand that you don't have to connect them all for the audience.

Sometimes the missing or eliminated steps can be referred to or implied in the scenes that remain—viewers put together in their heads what "must" have happened:

"Ah! Cary Grant [in *North by Northwest*] must have overpowered the housekeeper when he realized her gun was loaded with blanks."

"Ah! John Wayne [in *Stagecoach*] is alive and embracing Claire Trevor, so he must have won the shoot-out with the Plummers."

Cuts Often Come Early in the Script

When cutting, remember this: almost invariably, the part of the script that needs cutting most is the first third or half. Taking too long to get the script on its feet can be a severe drag on the audience's attention. Once the audience is hooked—engaged by the characters and their conflicts—you still have to be efficient, but not as much as during the set-up.

The piece of rewriting advice I give most often is this: cut fifteen pages from the first half of the script. It is amazing how often that's what's needed. The earlier the cuts come, the more effective they are, because they help get the story up and on its feet faster. In first drafts, writers often meander through act I, "finding" their characters. Lose that meandering in the rewrite.

Audiences want to know as quickly as possible what it is they're waiting to find out. They want to know why they're there.

Cutting and Rewriting on the Micro Level

To cut on the micro level is to cut scene by scene, speech by speech, sentence by sentence, and even word by word, crawling through the script and patiently carving out every single syllable that can be lost without harming comprehensibility. Review the "don'ts" of lean writing.

Look at the first and last lines in every scene—it is astonishing how often they can be cut. Writers often include extraneous matter in getting into and getting out of the scene, perhaps not understanding that scenes may be joined in progress and abandoned before the party is over—as long as we've gotten (or in some cases can reliably infer) the outcome of the scene's conflict.

If you are one of those rare writers who "overmilks" the scene, using any and all arguments and tactics that might be used in a given conflict, rein that in.

Once you have done your micro cutting, go back over the pages and polish. Neatness, grammar, spelling, and format are all important in the impression that your script makes on readers.

When you have done all that you can think to do, solicit the opinions of people you trust. But remember, asking for a read is a big favor. Obviously, someone can skim a script in half an hour, but for me to read a script critically takes between two and nine hours of what in many cases is hard mental work. (The more polished the script, the quicker the read, obviously.) People who agree to read your script are doing you a great service, so be grateful.

MAKING CRITICISMS

Imagine that you're in a class or a writer's group and you're asked to criticize another writer's work. What should you do?

Let's start with tone.

Writers hear better if they feel safe, so always start the session by pointing out something positive. You are not committing a grave moral error by finding a few nice words to say about

a script that you secretly loathe. No pages are so detestable that not a single felicity can be discerned in them. To be a writer is to submit to a public strip search, so it would be nice to refrain from poking with sharp objects. Nobody ever dares say a word to the director, costume designer, actors—yet people who don't know a comma from an elbow and have never written a readable word in their lives hold forth sententiously to screenwriters who must sit there and swallow it. The French novelist Jules Renard complained to his journal, "Writing is a profession in which you have to keep proving your talent to people who have none." So be nice to the writer.

Don't Make Suggestions Yet

There's a quotation widely attributed to H. G. Wells: "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft."

When discussing a writer's pages, the first thing the other writers in the room start doing is rewriting them—and that's different from critiquing them. People immediately start making suggestions as to what to do. No! The critique should lead to the solution to the dramatic problem, but that is not where it begins. In critiquing, carefully separate your reaction—the identification of the exact moment that you "felt" something was wrong—from your suggestion of how it should be fixed. Don't begin by saying "I think you should make the girl a visitor from Saturn," when in fact your problem is simply that you find her behavior in the dinner scene implausible. Begin instead "I found that I didn't believe that the woman would eat peas with her asparagus fork." OK, now the writer knows very specifically exactly what moment in the script you don't like. Now you or the group or the writer can begin to explore the question "*Why* doesn't this particular moment work?" Only then can the writers start thinking up their own solutions that emerge from their superior knowledge of the world of their script. The author will probably repair the problem in a unique way that emerges from her or his own voice, vision, and personal experience of the milieu. You're helping the writer by very specifically reporting your reaction to a certain moment in the script. But if you leap over that step and start giving your

ideas of what the author should *do* in the script, you're short-circuiting the process of helping to understand the problem and come up with a solution. That's not to say that it can't be helpful to hear from others in the class or writers' group how they'd solve a certain problem—ten heads are better than one and your fellow writers often have great ideas. But first identify the problem.

A crucial thing to understand is that the place where the script bothers you is not necessarily the place that needs fixing. Your annoyance with a particular moment in the script is a valuable symptom, but the real malady may lie elsewhere. For example, the behavior that you don't understand in act III may indeed be a result of, say, missing exposition in act I.

Also, when criticizing a script, keep in mind from whence you come. If you abominate all science fiction and the script is *Rocket Jockeys of Jupiter*, explain your prejudices. I find that the most useful criticism comes from people who like a script or have some sympathy with it.

A Five-Step Guide to Giving Criticism

Build trust. Strike a helpful, kindly note and begin by finding something positive to say about the script.

Offer gut reactions to specific moments. Be very specific about the exact moment in the script when you felt a negative reaction. "I was bored by the speech Julia gave when she kicked out her sister" is specific and clear. "I just hated the whole thing about Julia's sister leaving" is vague, general, and of little use. And remarks such as "It just needs something" warrant the death penalty.

Diagnose. Be very specific about what you think is wrong with the specific area you're criticizing. What rule or principle of dramatic writing is being violated? "Iris was always nice up to that point and her anger seemed out of character" is very specific.

Get the writer's own ideas. Once the problem area has been specified and the reason it doesn't work has been identified, then solicit the writer's own ideas on how it might be fixed. What does the writer think should be done to fix the problem?

Offer suggestions. Last, and only after steps one through four

have been completed, you may offer your suggestions as to what changes should be made, which in years to come the writer will remember as having thought of on his or her own.

HEARING CRITICISM

Few people are used to analyzing screenplays. Their criticism, while well intentioned, may be wrong.

Then again, sometimes a complete amateur will make observations that are spot on.

Listen calmly and take notes, never defending the work but rather asking probing questions to get a full explanation. A good response to criticism is "Can you expand on that?" Never make changes that you don't agree with unless someone who's writing you checks orders them—but hear everything.

The criticisms may sting. That's OK. Few writers let go of first draft choices easily or immediately. However, it is necessary to weed out what's wrong in order to allow all that is excellent about the script to flourish. So, when hearing criticism, first listen.

That's not as easy as it sounds if your defensive inner voice is yakking away at you so loudly that all you can hear is your own self-criticism. We neurotics, when hearing criticism, tend to experience an internal avalanche of *self*-criticism that drowns out the external criticism and makes us want to silence the person who is causing us discomfort—but then we won't get the benefit of the criticism.

Take notes. You know how to take notes, don't you? Just put your lips together and write.

Ask questions. Ask people to expand and amplify their criticisms. Ask them *exactly* where in the script they were when the criticism occurred to them (they probably won't remember, but if they do that's great). When they're done, ask if that's all.

Don't defend, explain, or justify. Keep your yap shut.

Mull it over in private. Once you have gathered up criticisms, evaluate them calmly in the privacy of your book-lined study.

In responding to criticism, don't contradict, argue, or defend but do ask for elaboration, clarification, and reasons. If the note is not really a criticism but a suggestion, try to figure out what

criticism is implied or, better yet, try to get the person to explain what problem the suggested change is intended to fix.

Sometimes the notes are from executives or producers. Thank them for the notes as you must thank anyone who takes the trouble to help. Say "Give me a day or two to absorb this." Go home. See if their notes are helpful. If not, well, maybe the next time you meet they'll have forgotten what they said.

Mulling It Over

My first reaction to all suggestions is usually "That's crazy." But I don't say it aloud, which is good, because a day or two later it doesn't seem so crazy.

The day after that, I see it as the answer to all my problems, and the day after that I'm claiming credit for it. When evaluating criticism from any source, know that what at first sounded like the irrational ranting of an egoistical boor often turns out to be helpful after all. Reserve judgment.

SOLICITING CRITICISM

"Coughing in a theater is not a respiratory ailment. It is a criticism," said Alan Jay Lerner in his autobiography *The Street Where I Live*.

So are skimming, skipping ahead, and falling asleep. If someone falls asleep reading my script, I want to know on what page that happened.

What you want most from people is a gut reaction. Laypeople in particular can tell you just two things: did they like it and precisely where were the parts that they didn't like, moments when their attention wandered. I mean *what line on what page*, and to remember that people have to read with a pencil in hand.

Here's what you tell friends, relatives, and whatever who read your script: "I think you have great instincts, so what I want from you is your instinctive reaction. As you're reading it, I want you to have a pencil in hand and be vigilant for those moments when you're bored, confused, or somehow turned off and mark that exact moment in the script. If at a particular moment you feel that making a cup of tea is what you'd prefer to be doing, mark

the part of the page where you decided to put down the script. That's valuable information."

The whole point of storytelling is to hold audiences' attention. Success equals holding their attention. To lose their attention is to fail. So what you need to know is where you lost them. Maybe readers can't tell you *why* you lost them, or what to do about it, but they can tell you where you lost them and that's what you need most.

READINGS

It is amazing how effectively a reading exposes dialogue weaknesses. You may well find listening to the reading of your work excruciating. Great! That means that the reading is doing its job of exposing flaws. Remember, the reading is not about passively basking in glory. It is a step in the development of your script to the point where you can confidently show it to industry professionals or commit your own precious resources to an independent production. Unfortunately, most screenplays have so many characters that finding enough decent performers can be a problem.

If you do have a reading, have the performers and listeners fill out anonymous evaluation sheets afterward. Often the people with the best criticisms are too shy or polite to speak them aloud. Listen to everything but never act on anything until you believe it in your heart. Still, if you hear a particular criticism more than once, there's something there.

NOTE TO NEUROTICS

A lot of writers beat themselves up about rewriting. They never feel quite done with the script, so they keep fiddling and tweaking. They say to themselves, "What's wrong with me that I can't ever seem to be really finished?"

Nothing is wrong with you. It's just that works of art aren't ever finished. That's not to say that we never let go of them, but the feeling that they aren't finished is normal and sensible because they aren't. Picasso said it best: "To finish a work? To finish

a picture? What nonsense! To finish it means to be through with it, to kill it, to rid it of its soul, to give it its final blow, the *coup de grâce* for the painter as well as for the picture" (*Picasso: Portraits and Souvenirs* by Jaime Sabartés).

An artist never stops growing and changing. From day to day what you have inside to bring to bear on your work changes and expands. You always have more to give.

We stop working on a script for a variety of reasons, often having to do with a deadline. Maybe it goes into production. Or maybe the producer takes it away and gives it to another writer. Maybe the producer says, "Perfect, don't dare change a word." Maybe you lose interest and move on to something else. Or maybe you've done everything you can think of to make it good, which is the best reason of all. However, you can bet your two best typing fingers that when you come back to it in two years you'll think of ways to make it better. That's just how it is because there is no such thing as perfect and you're getting smarter.

Finally, sometimes we let go because it was a lousy idea to begin with: no matter how we fuss, it will never be right and no one will ever love it but us. That's OK, because you had fun writing it and now you're a better writer, so start something new that benefits from your improved skills. Sometimes it's best to start something new that comes out of who you are now, instead of endlessly reworking the past in an effort to prove that you were right all along.

THE REWRITE AT A GLANCE

Rewriting a first draft often means soliciting feedback. The key is getting people to read with pencils in their hands so that they can tell you the exact page and line where their attention wandered or their guts told them something was wrong. Gut reactions are gold—as long as they're pegged to a specific page and line. "I don't know, it was just missing something" is worse than useless.

When people give you their feedback, ask for elaboration, take notes (because the noise in your head is probably drowning it all

out), and never defend or explain. Think it over. The remark that sounded like madness two days ago may suddenly be the answer to everything.

Review this book before you begin rewriting because it helps to refresh your mind as to the principles in play.

Start by cutting. Opportunities to cut often happen early in the script and at the top or bottom of individual scenes.

Cut surgically. Sometimes a very small adjustment will solve a problem—if it's the right adjustment. Don't panic.

Finally, remember that even a trained opinion is nevertheless but a single opinion. The view that counts most is yours. You're the artist. You are the one who must be satisfied with your work. As Katharine Hepburn once said to the *Cleveland Press* (in an interview by Tony Mastroianni), "My mother told me that if you please yourself you can be sure someone is pleased."

SELLING YOUR SCRIPT

Nobody likes rejection, and yet even the best script in the world is going to suffer a lot of rejections along the way to finding that one magic "yes." So court rejection but take it with a grain of salt. Remember, *Time Magazine* panned *Singin' in the Rain*.

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1. POLISH YOUR SCRIPT

Make sure that your script is ready to go. It should have gone through at least two drafts and a polish. Marketing is work, and there's no sense in subjecting yourself to it before you have a product that's truly ready. Lead with your best effort.

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2. COMPOSE A PITCH AND A QUERY LETTER

A good query letter is brief (less than a page) and snappy. It tells just enough about your script to intrigue and not so much as to sate. Make sure you include a hook: something that'll grab your readers' attention and make them understand why the public will want your movie. Max Adams in *The Screenwriter's Survival Guide* says a perfect template for a pitch line is "(Title) is a (genre) about (protagonist) who must (objective) or else (dire thing that will happen if protagonist fails)."

If you've won any kind of award for the script or have some special credentials as a writer or a person, mention them.

The letter should be targeted to someone specific (not "Dear Sir or Madam").

Do your research so that you know some reason why that person might be interested in your script. Here's a sample query letter:

"Dear Cecil: I am a 21-year-old student at San Jose State University and I've written a script about my experiences as a surfer chick in Santa Cruz called *Surf Shack*. It has love, guns, and ecology and is sort of *Gone with the Wind* with surfers. It won the Santa Clara County Film Festival Best Screenplay Award last year. Since you were once a champion surfer, I thought you might enjoy it. Would you like to give it a read? Yours truly, Betty McSophomore."

When comparing your movie to other movies, pick hits, preferably recent ones.

It's OK if you're young—the business likes young—and it's OK to be an outsider. Don't pretend to be more than you are. Be sincere and humble, but not pathetic, needy, desperate, or self-deprecating. The best way to come off is as an artist who's passionate about the material. The worst way to come off is needy, cynical, or desperate. Never seem desperate. Seem like you don't need it. Which, if you manage *not* to think about outcome, is how you'll seem.

Obviously, the very best way to get a script read is to know somebody, but to know people in the business you have to live in Los Angeles, be born into a show business family, or do drugs with the right people, which can cause brain damage that limits your writing ability. If you don't know influential people, you're going to have to send query letters to names you find through research.

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3. BUILD YOUR CONTACT LIST AND SEND OUT QUERY LETTERS

To target your query letter, you need names and addresses of contacts. Don't query studios. They only take submissions from agents. You need an agent or a producer (or a production company) to take the script around to studios on your behalf. Agents and managers are harder to interest than producers or production companies and often won't work as hard for you, so I suggest concentrating your first efforts on producers and production companies.

If you do land an agent or manager, that doesn't mean that

your job is done. Even when represented by an agent, the writer is the one who usually finds the work. The agent just negotiates the deal.

Start building your contact list by identifying thirty movies that are like your script. For example, if your script is a low-budget horror movie aimed at the teen audience, make a list of thirty such films, preferably recent moneymakers. Use that list to glean as many names of production companies, executive producers, and producers as you can—people who have demonstrated an interest in the kind of thing you've written. Find the addresses on IMDbPro.

Sending out multiple queries is fine, but be careful about querying more than one person at the same company.

When looking at names within companies, the director of development and the story editor are often good choices, but sometimes you may want to take a chance and pick the president. Finding names is often done by reading the "trades": *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*. There you can get news of deals, names of players, and ideas as to which producers and production companies to query. Keep an eye out for the AFM (American Film Market) issue of *Variety*.

When choosing targets for your query letters, remember to track down companies that have a record of producing what you wrote. If you have an indie drama, it's a waste to send it to a company that only makes big budget sci-fi movies. Be familiar with the cable environment. If you have a script that's right for a particular channel, find out the names of producers and production companies involved in prior movies and approach them.

If you have the title of the picture, www.imdb.com can help you find the names of the producers.

Once you've completed your push for a producer, compile a list of a hundred agents, and query them.

Then make a list of thirty stars who might be able to get your picture made. If you can get their attention and get them to read the script, they might attach to your project. This is almost impossible to do but is a dandy shortcut if it works. Note: stars are people who can and do carry pictures and are only going to

attach to your picture if the part being offered is a lead. Actors often have their own production companies, and that's the best way to reach them.

Actors are very hard to get to personally. Directors are a little more approachable but still not easy. Finding the addresses and phone numbers for them is difficult. Some of the reference books list their agents. But reaching people through agents is iffy at best—the agent isn't obligated to pass something along unless it's a genuine offer of work.

Next make a list of thirty film directors who might want to be attached to your script. They won't produce your movie, but if they do attach it will be much easier to attract a producer. When it comes to contacting actors and directors, it helps to be creative and persistent.

Plan to send out at least 250 letters. Some letters will be precisely targeted (which is ideal); other names you'll just pick on a hunch. Send out your letters ten at a crack—that way you'll keep the process manageable and be able to correct your mistakes. There's nothing worse than dropping 250 letters in the mailbox, then coming home and realizing that they all had the same typo. Out of these queries you may receive thirty responses, almost all negative, but maybe three will want to see your script. Mail them the script with a very brief cover letter, write "requested material" on the outside of the envelope, and four weeks later follow up with a polite, nonpushy call ("This is Betty McSophomore—just calling to see if you got my script"). And, of course, you can also send out queries via email if you get the precise email address of the exact person you're targeting.

If you're great on the phone, cold calling with your pitch is a great way to go. Writers tend to be cowering introverts (like me), but if you're an extrovert—go for it. It's harder to say no to a human voice than to a letter or email.

Because you are an unrepresented writer, readers will often want you to sign a release saying that you can't ever sue them for anything ever no matter what they do to you or your cat. I'm not a lawyer, but people in your position generally sign or don't get read. That's not legal advice. You can only get that from a lawyer,

which I am not. That said, I generally show my work to anyone who asks who's in the business.

Keep records of every phone call, letter, and response. If people say "no" but that they like your style, great—keep track of them for your next script.

Interesting Websites

You can find all kinds of information online, including contact information for specific people. Here are some useful websites.

WGA.org, the Writers Guild of America West site, publishes a list of guild signatory agents who will accept query letters from newcomers. Some agents and production companies won't read unrepresented (unagented) scripts unless the scripts are registered with WGAW, which you can do online.

IMDb.com has credits for everything ever made.

IMDbPro has great agent and producer contact information. They charge but they're worth it.

Withoutabox.com is the one-stop shop for information on film festivals.

MovieBytes.com has the most information on screenwriting contests of any site.

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4. ENTER CONTESTS

Winning a contest has launched many a writer. Sometimes agents and producers contact contest winners, but if they don't you can use your win as a selling point in query letters. Even making the quarterfinals is worth mentioning in your query. You can find lots of contest information online that changes all the time: just type "screenwriting competitions" into a search engine and see what comes up. There are now hundreds of screenwriting competitions, and obviously a lot of them are pointless or swindles, but even winning a Podunk competition looks good on a query letter. In general a contest with real prize money is more legit. The nation's top fifteen contests are the Nicholl Fellowship, Scriptapalooza, CineStory, the Bluecat Screenplay Competition, the Austin Film Festival, the Cinequest Film Festival, Slamdance, Page International, American Zoetrope, Script

Pipeline, the Disney/ABC Writing Program, the Creative World Awards, the WriteMovies Writing Contest, the Big Break Screenwriting Contest, and the Fade in Awards.

Student competitions include the Broadcast Education Association Festival of Media Arts (which a lot of students have won using my method); the Samuel Goldwyn Awards (open only to University of California students); and the California State University Media Arts Festival (open to CSU students and often won by students using my method).

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5. MINGLE AND SCHMOOZE

It's hard to be in the right place at the right time if you never leave your apartment. Rub elbows with industry people and personally pitch them your script. Film is a relationship business, but try not to turn into a user or a phony. What counts in show business is genuine personal relationships—with the people you *really* know. Be nice. Build honest relationships with people you like. Start with your fellow film and theatre majors if you're at a university.

Be nice to actors; they're fun to drink with, someday might be stars, and are often interested in sexual experimentation.

Do local theatre—it's a great way to meet actors who may be perfect for your script if you shoot it independently.

Take classes—acting, film production, theatre directing, screenwriting—it all helps. Screenwriting classes vary wildly in quality (get the name of the teacher and find out what you can online) and just because a private school has a big rep doesn't mean its classes will be good, but all classes have one wonderful thing in common: deadlines. If you're taking a class for the deadline, you get deadlines in community college too.

A great way to meet people is to get work on a movie set, say as a production assistant (PA). People really get to know each other on the set, and you'll make a lot of friends. Expect to work for free at first.

If you have time, do an internship—but remember, to do an internship legally you must be enrolled in a class (tuition for a community college internship class isn't much).

What Do You Bring to the Party?
Everybody wants you around if you have a skill that's in demand, such as sound recording, costuming, makeup, accounting, catering, or entertainment law. If you have those skills indie filmmakers want to know you.

Volunteer
Donate your time to things like the local film festival and film organizations such as Women in Film. Everyone likes people who pay their dues. Working for charitable and nonprofit causes not only generates good karma but makes good friends. Don't be too pushy—the writer who's always saying "Read my script, read my script" is a nauseating cliché, but sooner or later you'll be in situations where you can casually mention your script.

Writers' Groups
Join or start a writers' group with five or six other writers who are at the same level you are (or higher), for feedback, for psychological support, and to share contacts.

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6. MAKE IT YOURSELF

If you have an indie-style script, maybe you can shoot it yourself. Don't know how? The best way to learn how to direct a film is to direct a film.

And if you can raise some money you can always *find* a director and be the writer-producer. A good student director can make the right script for surprisingly little.

Notes on Low-Budget Production Requirements
In general the sky's the limit when writing a spec script for Hollywood—if you can imagine it, the visual effects houses can do it. In fact, the studios generally *prefer* big, difficult, effects-laden pictures, which keep out the riffraff and the French.

But many of my university students write scripts with the aim of shooting them themselves, usually digitally, and have done so with spectacular results. When writing with the intention of shooting a picture independently, keep these tips in mind:

- Few locations and camera setups.
- A small cast.
- No crowd scenes. You think that you'll get volunteers to be extras. You won't.
- No weather. Rain is expensive.
- No special effects.
- No stunts.
- No car chases.
- No "period" stories. Set your script in contemporary America.
- No animals or children. Both cause delays, and animal wranglers cost money.
- Absolutely no songs specified in the script; getting music rights is expensive, messy, and will ruin your life.
- Locations that are easily secured: an apartment or a classroom. Forget the top of the Empire State Building.
- Don't expect to build sets—lumber costs the world.
- Do something different that they can't get from Hollywood. Gay, lesbian, ethnic—subcultures that aren't being served by Hollywood could be your niche.

The most important technical issue on an indie is sound. If you have money left over after feeding the crew, spend it on sound.

And remember—if not you, who?

SELLING YOUR SCRIPT AT A GLANCE

Producers, agents, and stars are all possible roads to production. Write a good query letter and send it out 250 times. Don't expect a lot of responses and remember—you only need one.

Entering contests is a great idea, especially the more respectable ones. If you have the temperament for it, get out and schmooze. And never forget that the discouragement and rejection that you feel during the process of selling your screenplay are absolutely normal, but it helps to think about it as a game, with detachment, and to forget about the outcome.

There's a myth that I didn't mention at the top of the book: "Writing a screenplay is pointless unless it gets produced."

Wrong. Screenwriting is fun. The world may or may not embrace your art, but it can't stop you from having the fun of creating it, so keep at it. If you're fifty, write a script a year for the next fifty years.

One of them will click.

FADE OUT.

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